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Narratives of Five South Asian Women**

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*'Tis not in seeking,
'Tis not in endless striving
Thy quest is found.
Be still and listen.
Be still, and drink the silence
Of all around.
Not for the crying,
Not for thy loud beseeching
Will peace draw near.
Rest, with palms folded,
Rest with thine eyelids fallen—
Lo, peace is here.*

Edward Rowland Sill, American poet (1841)

University of Alberta

**LEARNING SPIRITUALITY:
NARRATIVES OF FIVE SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN**

by

Jody Lynn Marshall



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
in
Adult and Higher Education

Department of Educational Policy Studies

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Fall 1998

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Learning Spirituality: Narratives of Five South Asian Women** submitted by Jody Lynn Marshall in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Adult and Higher Education.

DEDICATION

With love, I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother and friend,

Luella Dean Wilson.

At 92 years, she remains a vital, strong and remarkable woman.

*I am thankful for her unfailing support, encouragement,
tremendous belief in my abilities...(and her weekly dinners!)
which all helped to ensure my success as a graduate student.*

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores spirituality and its connection to learning through the understandings of South Asian women. Based on a narrative approach, I conducted interviews with five women who currently reside in Edmonton, Alberta. Themes arising from the data highlighted the interrelationships between culture, religion and spirituality, holistic approaches to learning, the importance of the relational self, and the prevalence of learning through action. While the women's understandings of the term *spirituality* differed, many felt their spirituality (while perhaps not named as such) to be an extension of their formal religious beliefs which involved recognizing and nurturing a connection with something greater than themselves. The findings encourage continued research in holistic teaching and learning where intuitive as well as cognitive based approaches are recognized and included.

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This study would not have been possible without the five South Asian women who shared their stories with me. They are remarkable women and the research would not have been the same without the unique and personal contributions of each one of them. I would like to personally thank them all for their honesty, their willingness to share and reflect on their own stories and their gifts of time.

I thank Maya for her patience in the early part of the study when I was struggling to find a “fit” between research methodologies and my vision of this study. She tolerated and even appeared to enjoy the process which by no means went according to plan. (I have since discovered that this is a typical part of the seemingly never ending “research learning curve.”) From Taja, there expounded a unique joy and unrelenting faith that was contagious to be around. Sita offered thoughtful careful reflection, an amazingly broad

perspective of Hinduism and invaluable comparative insights into Eastern and Western cultures. Thank you to Lotus for her gentle sharing of her blossoming spiritual practice and her remarkable and practical insights regarding how to maintain spiritual practice and still function in the world. And finally, my sincere thanks to Ridha who shared her amazing ability to face life's great difficulties with humor and integrity. Her honest telling of her struggles resonated with, affirmed and illuminated my own. I am indebted to all of these women for their openness and their trust in me to tell their stories.

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CHAPTER 1: UNDERTAKING THE STUDY

What does a study focusing on spirituality have to do with adult learning?

Spirituality, and Asian spirituality in particular, may seem only remotely related to the adult education field which has been long dominated by practical concerns. According to Miller and Drake, educators avoid the word *spiritual* because it makes us uncomfortable. “We focus on outcomes rather than have students explore the fundamental questions of life” (1997, p. 239).

Spirituality is often seen as a way of giving meaning to our lives through being connected to the world and to the reality of the sacred. Borg, a religious scholar, offers simply that “spirituality is for the hatching of the heart” (1997, p. 128). Spirituality eludes exact definitions and does not lend itself well to absolutes or fit neatly into categories or scales. Certainly, this is recognized by MacKeracher (1996), who states that “writing about spiritual learning is rather like nailing jelly to a wall” (p.164). You might then ask, “why would I choose to study spirituality and spiritual practice?”

In response, Miller and Drake believe that education should address fundamental questions in life including, “what is the purpose of human life...and what is our role in the universe?” (1997, p. 239). Similarly, Daloz (1986), explains that “a good education,” in fact, “tends to our deepest parts, enriches them, nourishes the questions from which grow the tentative answers that, in turn, sow fresh questions about what is important” (p. 2). We often miss the mark, however, in schools and universities as spirituality is rarely addressed.

Spirituality can serve as a vehicle for seeking meaning and for making sense of the world, and as such it can inform how we see the world and ourselves in relation to it

(Moffet, 1994). Clearly, spirituality can be a powerful influence in our lives. As an avenue for ongoing informal learning, and for insights on how spiritual perspectives can also shape our approach to formal learning, spirituality is an important area of study for adult educators. Merriam and Caffarella (1991) provide support for increasing our understanding of spirituality and its influence on learning. They acknowledge that “the more we know about adult learners, the changes they go through, and how these changes motivate and interact with learning, the better we can structure learning experiences that both respond to and stimulate development” (p. 35).

At present, spirituality is enjoying increasing interest while formal religious institutions in the West are currently suffering from reduced attendance and public support. According to Westerhoff and Eusden (1982), “wherever we look, we discover persons on a journey toward a consciousness in which subjective, depth experiences are as important as objective, empirically measurable, rational explanations” (p.3). People are becoming increasingly aware that “there is something missing in their lives.” Some authors blame the commercial values of a global economy for all but stifling spiritual values. “Rationality has so defeated spirituality that governments as well as individuals calculate their values in terms of utilities rather than duties. The assumption is that having more means being more. People have become ciphers rather than selves” (Garrison, 1998, p. 1). For Tillich (1959), the source of our dis-ease in current Western culture is our tendency to focus our attention on the finite. Borg (1997) elaborates this view:

Our modern preoccupation with producing and consuming leads us to live on the surface level of reality and seek our satisfaction in the finite. The sacred is known in the depths of reality, and not in the manipulation and consumption of the surface. (1997, p. 113)

The struggle for understanding has long been part of the human condition

Aristotle taught that we, by our very nature, seek to know. Westerhoff and Eusden (1982) see “the quest for the integration of the material and the nonmaterial, the body and the soul, the secular and the sacred” as being the focus of all life. “Spirituality has to do with being an integrated person in the fullest sense,” (p. 1) they contend. This often involves questing and exploring a spiritual dimension which can only be known directly by encounter and participation. According to King (1992), the spiritual quest is “the basic human search for the ultimate meaning of existence. It is the continuing discovery of our real nature, the wisdom of self-understanding and the reach for truth beyond our current grasp” (p.15). To Fowler (1981), our quest is clear and life-shaping. “We are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living” (p.4).

Many Westerners are drawn to Eastern religions and spiritual traditions to address this need. Christianity, according to some religious writers, leaves many unsatisfied as it is largely concerned with belief in doctrines while Eastern religions address states of mind. “The wisdom of the East has a strictly practical aim which is not mere knowledge *about* the universe; it aims at a transformation of the individual and of his feeling through experience rather than belief” (Watts, 1968, p. 140). Understanding spiritual perspectives of people who originate from Asian countries is particularly important as religious and spiritual practices are central to many Asian cultures and are even more likely to influence adult learning and adult education. Westerhoff and Eusden (1982) encourage

seeking a wider perspective that will allow us to grasp the possibilities of our world, cross religious boundaries, and journey to other traditions. “If we are engaged in the wider meaning of religion, we can no longer be content with the cerebral and often superficial spirituality that characterizes much of Western theology and life” (p. 5). We are also encouraged to look beyond our cultural boundaries by Quintet (1845), a French poet and historian. “It is certain that if you would have the whole secret of a people,” he advised, “you must enter into the intimacy of their religion.”

In these times of increasing diversity in adult education classrooms, a clear understanding of Eastern spirituality and its influence on learning is necessary to best address the needs of Asian students. It would also deepen our understanding of its attraction for Western students. Existing adult education and spiritual development theories present primarily a Western perspective. Brookfield (1987) notes that the majority of adult education literature pays little attention to the cultural context of learning and challenges adult educators to consider cultural influences on adult education programming. MacKeracher also contests the adult education literature since “much of the literature on adult learning and development is written by men about male behaviors which are described as ‘normal’ for all humans both men and women” (1993, p. 72).

Literature documenting the spirituality of Asian people and its relationship to their learning is noticeably scarce. While there are some writings on spirituality and adult learning, there is a particular silence with regards to spirituality as an avenue of adult learning and, as a learning event in itself, for women of Asia. This qualitative study acknowledges and addresses that silence.

Surfacing My Path to the Research

The seed of this research grew from a book entitled *The Feminine Face of God* which I discovered in the fall of 1996. In this seminal work on women's spirituality, the authors Anderson and Hopkins (1991) described their travels through North America, meeting with women who represented a broad range of spiritual and religious perspectives. They asked the women what initiated and sustained their spirituality and how it influenced their view of themselves and the world. The authors queried what role spirituality played in times of struggle and whether spiritual lives typically included a journey or quest. Did these women, in whose lives spirituality played such an pivotal role, embark on journeys or pilgrimages which seemed so typical of prominent male figures in formal religious and mythical traditions?

Christ traveled to the desert to seek a connection with the sacred. Buddha left his family, and after a period as an ascetic, attained enlightenment beneath a tree. Joseph Campbell (1968) in his classic work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, charted the journey of the hero which is common to many cultures. Did the women often leave their lives behind in order to follow or realize a spiritual path? Did this involve leaving behind what was comfortable and familiar? According to many of the women interviewed by Anderson and Hopkins (1991):

The familiar roles that have let us feel strong and sure of ourselves are gone, and along with them goes the predictability of our lives. To add to our insecurity, anxious friends and family are likely to ask, 'Why can't you be satisfied with things as they are?' and 'Aren't you afraid you'll regret this?' In fact, that may be exactly what we are afraid of, and we may know almost as little as they about why we're leaving the old ways behind. When we ask ourselves why we want to leave or change, the only response may be a silent yearning or an unrelenting ache in the heart. (p. 560)

I suspect these words resonated with me as they seemed to echo parts of my own story. I traveled originally to Asia in 1989 and spent a year volunteer teaching and traveling in South and South-East Asia. During that time, I found myself attracted to Buddhist religious practices and intrigued by the Hindu traditions. My own interests in personal growth led me to meditation experiences while in Asia that I had not been exposed to in my Western religious upbringing. My interest in Eastern spirituality was shared by many other Westerners who apparently were also seeking something else beyond their own traditional frames of meaning. I had initially planned to begin graduate school in 1990, but found that my learning while in Asia was more intense, diverse and rewarding than I had anticipated and set my mind upon returning overseas. I did return to Nepal and India in 1994 for another ten months. When friends and family queried why I was going again, I found that I had no articulate reply that would satisfy both them and myself. All I knew was that “I wasn’t done yet.” The words of the women recounted in the *Feminine Face of God* gave me something to hold onto and helped me make sense of my own experience.

Choosing a Direction

From my own story surfaced the original questions that guided the early phases of this research. My initial questions focused on discovering the reasons for embarking on spiritual journeys and identifying common elements or stages of the journeys. I was also interested in what patterns of adult learning emerged through spiritual experiences and how spiritual practices informed self-knowledge.

The direction of the research altered and shifted as I explored related literature. I focused on spiritual journeys and then on spirituality as a form of transformative learning,

and continued to struggle with the meaning and importance of spirituality and its connection to learning, which often seemed nebulous and confusing. I piloted the study with Maya, a gentle and warm woman from Nepal. As my first participant, she not only helped to illuminate the occasional semantic miscommunication, but brought into question the key concepts that shaped my original view of this research. Through my interviews with her and the other participants, the direction and actual questions addressed by this study and our conversations evolved. Through reading and rereading the transcripts, the following purpose and focus emerged.

The Guiding Questions

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the spirituality of South Asian women. In particular, I am interested in spirituality's influence on how Asian women experience, learn or "come to know," and make meaning of the world. The guiding questions that arose from the conversations were:

How do South Asian women understand and make sense of their spiritual practices?

How does their learning associated with and stemming from their spiritual practices inform our understanding of cultural influences on adult learning?

A Note to the Reader

The illusiveness of spirituality may be intriguing or discouraging for you. As the primary researcher, I reluctantly admit that this study has illuminated my affection for and comfort with boxes and categories. It has stretched and informed me and challenged me to live with the inherent ambiguities that surface when asking challenging questions within a qualitative framework. Merriam states that qualitative researchers must have an

enormous “tolerance for ambiguity” (1988, p. 37). Part of this ambiguity arises from the lack of exact and standard protocols and procedures in qualitative research for designing the study, data collection, and interpretation. Other ambiguities arise from the acknowledgment and surfacing of multiple perspectives. I am reminded of and reflect upon the words of Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) who queries, “what insights arise from the experience of multiplicity and ambiguity? (p. 10). I am learning, as Bateson suggests, that creativity can indeed flourish midst the angst of living within ambiguity. I hope that this study will provide you with opportunities for reflection upon your own perspectives of spirituality and learning.

CHAPTER 2: SURFACING SPIRITUALITY AND LEARNING

Spirituality influences and is influenced by a number of fields. Relevant research emerges from literature on adult education, developmental psychology, religion, and feminist spirituality. In order to provide a context for the literature, I begin with a discussion of spirituality and religion from Eastern and Western perspectives, and then explore its relationship to adult education. Finally, I examine the role of various theories in helping reveal insights about spirituality and learning for women.

An Introduction to Spirituality

What is spirituality? I don't have a clue, except that it is both ineffable and inescapable.... I belong to no group and hold no beliefs. An acid test of sorts. I have explored Christianity, Judaism, Sufism, Buddhism and native traditions and yet, after all is read and pondered upon, all that remains is an experience: an experience of connectedness to a universal order and even, at times to a benevolent will...Those rare instances of total openness and of complete unity dissolve the boundaries of my human condition. I then get a sense of Being, Being in all eternity, in all impunity. I know at some mute and distant level, that I must seek ever more of that connectedness.... So, as primitive as my spirituality may be, devoid of concepts, prophets and precepts, it is still the driving force in my life.

Rachel Thibeault (1997, p.112)

While the experience of spirituality can be influential, as evident in the words above, the word *spirituality* seems to have lost much of its essential meaning and become a generic term for any nonspecifically religious action. Precise definitions of spirituality are illusive. Garrison (1998) defines *poesis* as “creation making or calling into existence” and *spirituality* as simply the “poetic quest for meaning” (p. 1). The broad implications of spirituality from a Western perspective are echoed in the words of MacKeracher.

I understand spirituality to be the highly individualistic, internal experience of expanding beyond the limits of my body and mind, feeling connected to aspects of the external world which are important to me - to others, to the world, and to a

greater cosmic being, and of feeling connected to all aspects of myself. (1996, p.163)

The yearning for connectedness, as echoed by MacKeracher and Thibeault, to the world and often to a presence greater than ourselves is a prevalent theme. Westerhoff and Eusden explain it as “a search for spiritual revelation, illumination, and insight. We yearn for the ability to live fully in harmony with self, otherselves, the natural world, and with the ground of our being” (1982, p. 3).

Spirituality and Religion

Both Durkheim (1968) and Flood (1996) define religion as a “unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things,” which Durkheim believes “creates a social bond between people” (p.37) and Flood portrays as “imbuing individual and social life with meaning” (p. 9). Religion, then, contains both beliefs and practices, acts to bring people into community, and give meaning to their individual and social lives. From Western perspectives, spirituality, the yearning for connectedness, and religion are not synonymous terms and, in fact, exist almost independently. People feel comfortable saying that they are spiritual but not religious. While spirituality may find expression in religion and religion at its fullest will be deeply spiritual, spirituality remains quite distinct from organized religion. According to Hague (1995), religion tends to focus on belief, rituals and practice and is often culturally based while spirituality primarily centers on personal experience. Spirituality not only gives a distant vision of the “more” beyond, but requires “acts of knowing, constructing and composing by individuals” in order to understand their relationship to that which is greater than themselves” (Fowler, 1981, p. 24).

Westerhoff and Eusden remind us that “The East and the West present us with two different experiences, rooted in cultures and histories worlds apart...”(1982, p. 3). As much of the literature concerning spirituality and its relationship to religion, has been written from a Western perspective, caution is required when attempting to apply it to Eastern cultures. The distinction between spirituality and religion may, in fact, be Eurocentric in nature. Asian cultures are grounded in religious practices and thus spiritual concerns may be inseparable from religion and influence world and learning perspectives as much if not more than in the West. .

Eastern religions have “typically been perceived as wholly ‘other’ - that is the antithesis of all that is logical and rational, especially when juxtaposed with the indigenous and philosophical traditions of the West” (Littleton, 1996, p. 11). Eastern cultures are also thought to reveal more holistic orientations in contrast to the dualism often found in Western contexts. In the West, there exists a “...dualism of body and spirit and a consequent separation of the sacred and secular, the spiritual and material, piety and politics” (Westerhoff and Eusden, 1982, p. 8). Neither the religious nor secular cultures in the West encourage an integrated, holistic understanding of human life, which may be more apparent in cultures where Eastern religions are prominent.

What is most distinctive in religion cannot be put into words. This is the nonrational, that which is not capable of being conceptualized. The nonrational is a numinous experience, partly a feeling of dependent creatureliness and partly a consciousness of something outside us that is wholly other. While Western Christianity has become highly rational, we must never forget that the essential core of religion is in danger of being lost under a cloud of rationalizing. At the core of religion is a nonrational element that cannot be conceptualized or put into words, though it can be communicated. (Westerhoff & Eusden, 1982, p. 47)

Authors who write in the field of religion, note that Westerners seeking spirituality are often yearning to escape rationality and duality and are learning to “be present” which is a concept more typical of Eastern religious perspectives (Suzuki, 1970; King, 1992). Thich Nhat Hanh (1996), a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, whose writings appeal to many from the West and East illustrates “being present” in the following meditation:

Breathing in, I calm body and mind.
 Breathing out, I smile.
 Dwelling in the present moment
 I know this is a wonderful moment.
 (p. 5)

Spirituality Development

The motif of a spiritual journey is prevalent in spirituality literature. The prominent theme involves taking a physical journey as exemplified by male historical religious figures including Christ and Siddhartha Gauthama (the Buddha.) Physical journeys were not commonly articulated in *The Feminine Face of God* by Anderson and Hopkins (1991). Interviews with women from many spiritual perspectives revealed that women did not typically include a pilgrimage component. If women did physically leave home, they did so after they made their connection with the sacred -- not to initiate the connection.

Home leaving [geographically] seems to have been an auxiliary process, something that helped widen or deepen a channel already running through the woman's life...home leaving served to increase permeability to the divine in a life that had already opened to it. (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p.51)

Women's spiritual quests appeared to more internal in nature. According to King (1992), spiraling is a common shape for women's spiritual journeys.

The spiral shows that each ordinary step in life changes us so that if we look behind us and chart where we have been, we can see that we are not exactly the same person as we were, even if the task is the same. Each time we spiral past the same kind of event, we are given another opportunity to integrate the learning which will move us toward our own personal evolution. (p. 10)

Another important aspect of spiritual experiences and journeys is whether time is primarily spent alone or in the company of others. In historical religious male journeys, the seeker typically undertakes the quest alone as in the case of Buddha or Jesus.

According to feminist author, Christ (1986), a women's spiritual quest includes moments of solitary contemplation but is strengthened by being shared with other women. Women also at times experience connection with a greater presence in a natural environment than in a formal religious setting. Primary differences may also exist between Eastern and Western spiritual journeys according to Campbell (in Groff & Smoker, 1996). In the East, where a group identity and culture are more dominant, one is expected to follow the path set before by one's guru or spiritual teacher. In the West, where individual identity and culture are more dominant, seekers are freer to embark on their journeys and engage in experiences of their own choosing.

The beginning phase of the journey is often triggered by a sense of emptiness or "nothingness" as it is labeled by Christ (1986). According to Joseph Campbell, there is a sense that "the familiar life horizon has been outgrown: the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (1968, p.58).

People engaged in spirituality also commonly report times of disillusionment and struggle often termed the "dark nights of the soul." "Dark night" is a metaphor for the sense of emptiness felt by those who have broken their ties with conventional sources of

value but have not yet discovered their grounding in new sources (Christ, 1986).

Anderson and Hopkins (1991) describe the “dark night” as losing:

a consciousness that once felt secure, had categories to fit things into and know who it was, where it was going and why. And what replaces this sureness is “not knowing”. And openness. And something unspeakably and sometimes almost unbearably, new. (p. 48)

According to one woman seeker, it is in the times of struggle “when you throw yourself into a situation where you have not got what it takes... [that you are able] to open up to God” (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p.50).

This often leads to a phase which Christ (1986) labels “awakening.” During the awakening phase, the “powers of being” are revealed. In men’s journeys, this awakening is typically a “conversion” experience which involves releasing their power to something greater than themselves. Women, in contrast, often describe their awakening as a coming to self -- a process of learning to trust the neglected or rejected parts of oneself -- rather than a giving up of self. According to Christ (1986), awakening involves a “grounding of selfhood in the powers of being, rather than a surrender of self to the powers of being” (p.19).

Spirituality and its Relationship to Adult Education

If we ask different questions, seek different information, or allow different boundaries, we might define the education of adults broadly as a human activity, not a profession or a field seeking ‘scientific’ verification. We might look beyond institutions to...grass roots education and ...communities producing and disseminating knowledge as a human activity. (Cunningham, 1989, pp. 33-34)

According to Merriam, it is clear that “how we position ourselves to view the field is crucial to what is included in adult education” (1995, p. 10). To what extent is spirituality seen as an aspect of adult education? Spiritual practices, with their profound

impact on how people make sense of the world, find personal and collective meaning and increase self-understanding, are valid forms of informal adult education which share goals common to formal adult education practices.

Three common classifications of adult education include formal, informal and nonformal education (Courtney, 1989). Formal education refers to educational institutions and specialized programs providing technical and professional training while nonformal education refers to organized educational activities outside the established formal system including community-based and community development efforts. “Informal education is generally unplanned, experience-based, incidental learning that occurs in the process of people’s daily lives” (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 14). As with adult learning, in general, informal education implies a lifelong process.

Learning is a broad concept and numerous definitions exist that attempt to capture its essence. According to MacKeracher (1996):

The activity of learning stems from a need to make sense of experience, reduce the unknown and uncertain aspects of life to a manageable level, and act skillfully in ensuring one’s survival and security. Unexpected conditions may interfere with the act of learning but not the need to learn. (p. 4)

Within adult education, there is growing acceptance for less formalized forms of learning. The recent tendency to substitute the term adult learning for adult education, reflects the growing interest in informal experiential learning that occurs outside the classroom. According to Thomas (1991), “...education cannot exist without learning. Learning, however, not only can exist outside the context of education but is probably most frequently found there” (p. 17). As learning is done by the learner rather than something

done to or for the learner, MacKeracher (1996) reminds us that, “learning proceeds independently of, and sometimes in spite of, education and schooling...” (p. 3).

Much of formal adult education practice involves instrumental learning and is behaviorist in its orientation. This is particularly true of human resource development or training in business. While much of the practice reflects a behaviorist orientation, “much of the rhetoric is humanistic in its focus on individual growth and development” (Merriam, 1995, p. 237). Self-directed learning which is a primary focus of current adult education practices grew out of the humanistic tradition (Knowles, 1980; Tough, 1971). According to Courtney (1989), the concept of the self-directed learner also reinforces the importance of less formalized forms of learning. Self-direction in a learner includes “conceiving goals and plans, exercising freedom of choice, using rational reflection, using will power to follow through, assessing plans, choices and outcomes, and exercising self-discipline” (MacKeracher, 1996, p. 58). While spirituality and informal education are linked, the introspective and intuitive nature of spirituality suggests a slightly different or perhaps less rational process than inherent in the self-directed learning proposed by MacKeracher (1996).

The Common Aims of Spiritual Practice and Adult Education

At the center of all human life is the quest for the integration of the material and the nonmaterial, the body and the soul, the secular and the sacred. Spirituality has to do with being an integrated person in the fullest sense.

(Westerhoff & Eusden, 1982, p. 1)

Spirituality as a form of informal adult learning shares many goals in common with its formal counterparts. Commonly, spirituality is lifelong in orientation and holistic in nature. Liberal education philosophies have also espoused a holistic orientation. Over

50 years ago, Livingstone listed that facilitating the development of “the gifts of human nature and becoming a full human being” as the key roles of education (1945, p. 3).

“Wholeness” in later adult education literature came to be linked with maturity which meant “the growth and development of the individual towards wholeness in order to achieve ... spiritual, vocational, physical, political and cultural goals” (Bergevin, 1967, p. 7).

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) note that currently, there is an absence of regard for holistic learning in formal higher education. While emotion, art, and spirituality are essential to human experience, they are also often beyond words, and are outside the scope of modern measurement which may attest to their lack of priority as learning pursuits. Kidd (1973) believes that learning which facilitates spirituality should be the primary goal of education. Spiritual learning requires both affective and cognitive elements and is facilitated not only through acquiring knowledge and skills, but also through self-discovery, self-expression and self-fulfillment.

Spiritual practices have long been linked with self fulfillment and development. Fowler (1981) believes that “faith is a primary motivating power in the journey of the self” (p.25). Christ (1986), Anderson and Hopkins (1991) and King (1992), who write from a feminist perspective, see spirituality as an important vehicle for increasing self-awareness and a sense of wholeness for women.. According to King, “it is the continuing discovery of our real nature, the wisdom of self-understanding and the reach for truth beyond our current grasp” (1992, p.25). Facilitating self development and personal growth are also identified as important roles of formal adult education practices (Beder, 1989; Selman and Dampier, 1991).

Central also to spirituality is the development of a sense of social responsibility, again a common aim of formal adult education activities (Spencer, 1997). It is not a passive experience but rather requires “acts of knowing, constructing and composing by individuals” in order to understand their relationship to that which is greater than themselves (Fowler, 1981, p. 24). Spirituality is a way of life - of being in the world. In short, it affects our behavior. Hague (1995) explains, “mature spirituality moves one to some kind of action; often this is moral action” (p. 13). It provides a relative perspective of the here and now and encourages exploration of values and ultimate concerns.

The exploration of values and ultimate concerns which is inherent in spirituality leads to questions about what is meaningful and to the search for meaning. MacKeracher (1996) points out that spirituality grows out of our sense of self and helps us to feel connected to a larger scheme of things and something greater than ourselves (MacKeracher, 1996). According to King (1992), “our spiritual quest is the basic human search for the ultimate meaning of existence” (p.15).

Instilling and facilitating meaning is also central to adult education. In fact, “meaning is a constant in learning and motivation” particularly in cross-cultural learning according to Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995). They talk of “felt meaning” which involves determining our sense of purpose. “Our purposes [meanings] influence what we perceive and how we think. They shape the reality we create” (p.165).

Spirituality and Adult Development Theory

I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me.

(hooks, 1994, p. 59)

bell hook's words echo the sentiments of many other researchers. We often look to existing theory to make sense of the world and I am no exception. "Theory organizes and integrates what we know, allowing us to order and remember and, therefore, to apply our knowledge to that which is unexplained" (Stevens-Long, 1990, p. 125). Fowler believes that "theorists of adult development have begun to play the role in our society that storytellers and mythmakers once played in primitive and classical cultures" (1981, p. 15). Similarly Daloz notes, "by suggesting the directions of growth throughout the life span, developmental psychologist are offering us 'masterstories' against which to hold our own lives' tales for comparison and, perhaps, for revision" (1986, p. 22). Daloz continues by saying that theory "can teach us to respect each student's uniqueness while we illuminate common questions about meaning in their lives - questions to which, regardless of subject matter, we all hold relevant answers" (1986, p. xviii).

Caution is required, however, in the application of the theories, particularly with respect to adults from other cultures. Existing developmental theories represent primarily white, middle-class and usually male Western perspectives (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Tennant & Pogson, who study adult development, caution that:

Adult development can only have meaning in a given social and historical context. By and large, development is said to occur when we observe growth in those qualities which a society [or particular culture] values... Thus development is not solely a psychological construct, it is also a social construct. (1995, p. 5)

Without culturally relevant and sensitive theory available, we must be cautious to not simply find what we are looking for. Daloz encourages us to view theory as possible "maps" of development which we may or may not choose to use as a guide.

...Good maps also offer choice; they are not mere formulas. And while developmental theories do imply direction, none insists that the journey can be

taken in only one way or, indeed, that it be completed at all. Just as a map frames the setting for a journey, so does a developmental theory offer a context for growth. It indicates landmarks, points out dangers, suggests possible routes and destinations, but leaves the walking to us. (1986, p. 46)

With the above caution in mind, it is apparent that the growth of spirituality, faith and meaning perspectives may relate to various types of developmental and learning theories. The terms to describe spiritual learning and development may include “transcendent learning, transpersonal learning, transformative learning, holistic learning, peak experiences, self-actualization...and self-transcendence “ (MacKeracher, 1996, p. 172).

Perspectives on women’s development have been provided by prominent female researchers including Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) and MacKeracher (1996). Their findings call into question the traditional male models of adult development which focus primarily on increasing autonomy and independence (Josselson, 1992). Research on women’s development has consistently indicated that “human interconnection and relatedness are a central plot of human development” (MacKeracher, 1996, p. 123). Gilligan (1982) argued that sex differences exist in moral and personality development (1982) and proposed a “care model” which focuses on concerns about being connected to others and the value of responsiveness to the needs of others.

Transition Theories

Theories and models of transition or transformation may also help to inform our understanding of spirituality. Kegan (1982) describes a spiral process reflecting our equal desires to be joined and integrated with others as well as to be separate and differentiated.

We cycle through levels when at times we are primarily preoccupied with our relations with “the other” and at times, we are mainly concerned with our “self” apart from the other. “Our lives can be understood as a series of transformations of how we see ourselves in relation to others” (Daloz, 1986, p. 66).

Mezirow’s transformation theory acknowledges that it is the way in which individuals make meaning of their experience that facilitates growth and learning. This learning involves critical reflection - questioning our assumptions and perspectives in order to transform our meaning perspectives (1990). According to Brookfield (1995), “bringing into critical consciousness the assumptions and perspectives about knowledge and social processes learned uncritically in childhood and adolescence” is arguably the unique function of adult learning (p. 4).

Commentary

Many theories seem to reflect aspects of adult personal development that relate to spiritual development. Spirituality also appears linked to informal adult learning and shares some characteristics of self-directed adult education practice. The literature, however, also points to gender differences in adult education and spirituality. These Western societal differences in culture, religion and spirituality may not be present in South Asian societies with their holistic orientation towards life.

CHAPTER 3: DISCOVERING THE VOICES

*In a very real sense, there is no experience without stories.
There is a dialectic between stories and experience.
Stories give shape to experience, experience gives rise to stories.
(Christ, 1986, p.5)*

The aim of this research was to present rich descriptions of compelling stories to stimulate further inquiry into the connection between spirituality and learning. I wanted to hear South Asian women give “voice” to their spiritual experiences. According to Britzman (in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), voice involves communicating meaning to someone else:

Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process. Voice suggests relationships: the individual’s relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence to language, and the individual’s relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process. (p.4)

My goal was not to provide generalizable results but rather to present rich descriptions of compelling cases to increase the likelihood that readers will transfer the possible learnings to their own experience.

To allow for the surfacing of the individual voices and to learn about the women’s spiritual experiences, I needed to hear their stories. I loosely followed a narrative inquiry method which uses stories as a medium for understanding human experience. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) hold that “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). The study of narratives is the study of the ways humans experience the world. Narrative inquiry allows us to come to a deeper understanding of lived experience as it is represented and given meaning through personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

Researchers in both adult education and spirituality emphasize the importance of listening to stories. Daloz, an adult educator whose work focuses on the development of mentorship, invites fellow teachers to "...listen to our students' stories, seeking to understand how their quest for education fits into the larger questions and movements of their lives" (1986, p. xviii). Christ, whose writings focus on spirituality, describes the importance and essence of "story" when she says:

When meeting new friends or lovers, people reenact the ritual of telling stories. Why? Because they sense that the meaning of their lives is revealed in the stories they tell, in their perception of the forces they contended with, in the choices they made, in their feeling about what they did or did not do. In telling their stories, people speak of moments when life's meaning seemed clear, or unfathomable. People reveal themselves in telling stories. (1986, p. 2)

The sense of intimacy, privacy and importance of story-telling is echoed in the words that begin *The Stories of Eva Luna*, a novel by Chilean author, Isabelle Allende. Eva's partner leans to her and sets the stage for her tales by saying, "tell me a story....Tell me a story you have never told anyone before (1989, p. 5). According to religious scholar, Crites (1971), every story has a sacred dimension, "not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because [one's] sense of self and world is created through them" (p. 295). The voicing of women's spiritual pursuits is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. "If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known" (Christ, 1986, p.1). Storytelling is also fundamental to the human search for meaning which is central in spiritual pursuits (Crites, 1971).

One intent of the study was to provide opportunities for the women to reflect on their spirituality in connection with their own learning. I had anticipated and hoped that involvement in the study would provide the participants with a further opportunity for

personal learning. The conversations and informal interviews provided the participants with structure that encouraged and supported reflection. According to Stevens-Long (1990), “in dialogue, the speaker affects both the listener and the self. We are affected, after all, by what we say, often more than the person who is listening” (p.127). Narayan (1991) also supports articulation and reflection on our personal narratives as guides to learning. She believes that “stories construct versions of reality that endow experience with meaning. Stories both teach and heal by encouraging individuals to observe and reflect on the personal self rather than to blindly identify with it” (p. 124).

Narrative inquiry requires acknowledgment and inclusion of my own assumptions and convictions. It was not my intent (nor do I think it possible) to avoid influencing this study. Central to the essence of qualitative research is the acknowledgment that I, as the researcher, am integrally involved in the research process. Merriam states that “how the investigator views the world affects the entire research process - from conceptualizing a problem, to collecting and analyzing data, to interpreting the findings” (1988, p. 53).

The researcher must be engaged by the question according to van Manen (1984). He says that “to truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being” (p. 44). For him, it is important that the researcher “lives” the question or even “becomes” the question. Clandinin and Connelly agree, noting “who the researchers are makes a difference at all levels of the research, and the signature they put on their work comes out of the stories they live and tell” (1994, p. 423).

Qualitative research calls us to be sensitive to our use of language. “Just as a piece of literature is not equivalent to its plot summary, qualitative research is not contained in

its abstracts. Qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading” (Richardson, 1994, p. 517). According to Crites (1971), a good narrative invites the reader to participate. Other prominent researchers concur that case studies and life stories should not only be read but also lived vicariously (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

According to Richardson (1991), who noted that research texts can be dull and tedious, one reason is that they are, by in large, homogenous; they lack signature. She asks, “how do we put ourselves in our own texts and with what consequences? How do we nurture our own individuality and at the same time lay claim to ‘knowing something’?” (1994, p. 517). In her own research, Schultz (1995) described how she tried to develop her research in a way that was both critical and imaginative. As a beginning researcher, I struggle with similar issues. I worry that my thesis may join the ranks of the “dust collectors” and have taken steps to try to avoid this fate.

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), it is the researcher’s job to “emphasize, describe, judge, compare, portray, evoke images and create, for the reader or listener, the sense of having been there” (p. 149). In response to Lincoln and Guba, I have allocated a substantial chapter to the women’s stories. I will endeavor to share details such as those of the interview environment to help give a more complete picture of the research settings. I will also provide descriptions of the participants’ backgrounds to aid readers make informed decisions regarding the findings.

In recognition that as the primary researcher, I am integrally involved in the shaping of this research, my voice will also be present. I have chosen to include some of my own stories, reflections and perceptions throughout this thesis. This was done in part

to share some of my own perspectives and thus the filters through which I have heard, understood and re-told the participants' stories. According to Khandewal (1995), "real objectivity means being clear about one's location rather than pretending to offer a view from nowhere" (p. 53). It is anticipated that some readers may think I have erred on the side of too much familiarity and too little scholarly prose while others may feel that I have not shared enough for them to accurately sense the "colors" that I have put on the research. Both perspectives are accurate.

Meeting the Participants

The participants in this study are five women who currently live in Canada. They originate from Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and are from Hindu, Moslem and Buddhist backgrounds. Some are students, others working professionals. Some are mothers, others single. What links them together is their common belief that their spirituality is central; it makes a difference in their lives.

I met most of the participants within a relatively short period of time, in a matter of only a few weeks. Some I met at a South Asian women's conference. During the gathering, I announced that I was completing a master's degree in Adult Education and was interested in studying spirituality in South Asian women and its impact on their learning. According to Morse (1991), participants "must be selected or carefully chosen according to specific qualities....They must be knowledgeable about the topic and experts by virtue of their involvement in specific life events" (p. 132). A "good" respondent also "has undergone or is undergoing the experience...is able to reflect and provide detailed experiential information about the phenomenon...[and is] willing to share the experience with the interviewer" (p.132). At the conference, in light of Morse's guidelines, I shared

my two prerequisites for participation in the study. The first was that the participants originate from South Asian countries which include Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives. The second was that they view their own spirituality and spiritual practices to be important, meaningful forces in their lives.

I also met one participant at a local Hindu temple and encountered my remaining participants through what Morse describes as the “snowballing” technique (1991). Before I knew it, I had met five remarkable spiritual South Asian women who were willing to share their stories.

I developed relationships with each of the participants which were as unique as we all are individuals. Some of the women became close friends, some guided and involved themselves in the process from a distance and some were tenacious in their desire to ensure the accuracy of the research. Most of all, I was engaged by and learned from all five participants.

The participants in this study are not intended to be representative of their various religious backgrounds and cultures. The very fact that these women live abroad here in Canada places them in a select group compared to many of their neighbours in their countries of origin. All of them are skilled in their chosen professions and many have received considerable formal education which is not always equally available for women in South Asian countries.

Insights on the Research Method

I had intended to also gather data by asking the participants to write about their spiritual experiences in a personal journal and to share with me the written stories that they were comfortable disclosing. I had hoped that the participants and myself would

meet as a group to share oral and written spiritual stories of their choice. This, I thought, would provide an opportunity for the participants to learn more about themselves and their own spirituality through interpreting and re-interpreting their stories in the company of others. This process is defined as “restorying” by Clandinin (1994).

I had grand visions of sitting in a room with three to four Asian women and listening to them share their stories, tentatively, of course, at first. But then, they would discover that this group was one of safety and that they could freely share themselves. I had hoped that the group conversation(s) would provide the women an opportunity to critically reflect upon their spirituality and learn about themselves.

My grand visions did not materialize. What replaced them was hopefully some increased awareness on my part. While all of my participants were willing and many eager to share their stories with me, more than one suggested that they would not be comfortable to speak freely in the presence of other women, particularly Asian women. While I recognize that the women felt comfortable sharing with me due in part to my eagerness and interest in their cultures, it likely had much more to do with the fact that I was Western which somehow provided them with some sort of invisible immunity.

The journaling and group discussion data collection techniques were not used because the women did not wish to do that. Other insights of possible challenges inherent in the proposed research design, and in my own assumptions and biases, surfaced early in the research process. They began during my first interview with Maya, the Nepali participant who agreed to pilot my study. It was apparent that Maya had been reflecting upon an earlier telephone conversation during which I had described the purpose and method of the study. The interview had just begun when she asked, “*You know Jody, I*

want to make clear. Is spirituality something related to the religion or is it different from that?"

I remember a feeling quite similar to my heart sinking, or at least slumping a bit. I had had my first taste of my research assumptions not being realized. Maya continued to not respond to my queries as I thought and hoped she would. Time with Maya provided me a tangible opportunity to surface and examine my research biases. Such opportunities occurred many more times with Maya and with the other participants as well.

Revealing My Assumptions

It was clear in my interactions with Maya that I had a set agenda I was hoping to meet. Notes that I recorded in my research journal revealed similar biases. I had hoped that Maya would be reflective of her religious experiences. Not only did I want her to reflect but I also wanted her to discover that the spiritual practices did not exactly “fit” for her. I had assumed that reflecting on spiritual practices may not be common to women of Asian cultures but I was hoping that these women may be exceptions to my arbitrary rule.

Notes in my research journal in November, 1996 reflect some of my early primary assumptions. An exercise in “trying on” various research questions or problems resulted in the following: “Stories of meaning through journeys touched by awe...Meaning making through journeys...Why do some people seek meaning while others do not?...Do people seek spiritual experiences to find meaning... Is meaning found through experiences of awe?” Through these questions and statements, it is clear that I believed, (or at least suspected), that spiritual experiences and orientations enhance the meaning in people’s lives. I also suggested that people actively and consciously seek spirituality

which takes the form of journeying. Other field notes from early spring, 1997 revealed the following biases: “Spirituality based on rituals is surface...Rituals without reflection are empty and are merely idolatry...The most important questions are abstract, not concrete.”

I had hoped that the women would learn about themselves while each told me her story. I suspected that Asian women got a strong sense of security from their rituals. I hoped to discover, however, that over time, they had grown past their rituals, left behind their patriarchal based religious traditions for a more personally defined spirituality. My own cultural background is in Christianity and I have traveled in Asia so I was aware (but hoped to overcome the notion) that I would not be able to completely understand what the women said due to cultural differences.

Other notes in my research journal also surfaced my fears. I worried that I would find that Asian women reflect little on their spiritual experiences and practice spirituality due primarily to tradition. Perhaps more importantly, I worried that spiritual journeys may not be relevant to Asian women.

Revised Research Methodology

The remaining data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the other four participants. Each of the participants attended one to three audio-taped 30 - 60 minute interviews which took place at their homes at their request. During my initial meeting with each of the participants, I described the purpose of the research study. They were also provided with a written description of the study and the terms of participation which included them being free to leave the study at any time (see Appendix A). Completing a formal agreement which outlined in detail what was expected of them in

their roles as respondents seemed much more important to me than to the participants. I had chosen preliminary pseudonyms for them to ensure their anonymity. Some of the women adopted these tentative pseudonyms while others chose their own. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and to further ensure confidentiality, all of the transcripts would be transcribed personally by myself.

Data Analysis

I transcribed all the interviews because I wanted to gain an intimate knowledge of the data. The transcriptions were slightly amended since spoken language is commonly less coherent than when we express ourselves in written text. The conversations between the participants and myself were no exception. As English is not the first language of any of the participants, grammar was corrected as this was essential for meaning.

I have included data from all the interviews in my analysis in order to provide as rich a description as possible. I reviewed various guidelines for coding and categorizing data (Berg, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and found myself overwhelmed with possibilities and particulars. According to Janesick (1994), there exists no “ideal” method for data analysis. Ultimately, the decision for coding the data resides with the researcher. I chose to use an inductive approach to analyze the pilot study data and also used a similar approach in the main study. As I read and reread the data, themes arose from the stories themselves. I felt that a deductive approach might allow my own assumptions to interfere with what the stories were really saying.

Using the highlighting approach described by van Manen (1984), I read the text several times and asked, “what statements or phrases seem particularly essential or revealing about the experience being described?” (p. 61). As suggested by Abrahamson

(1983), I began my inductive coding of the interviews by immersing myself in the transcription in order to allow the tentative categories to surface.

During the pilot phase of this study, after highlighting these statements in the initial interview with Maya, I sorted them according to tentative category labels or phrases. In order to enhance dependability, I shared the first transcript with two peers who provided feedback on my early categories and appropriate revisions were made. In order to further enhance credibility and address ethical concerns, I shared the transcript of the first interview which had been sorted categorically with Maya at the beginning of the second interview and incorporated her suggestions.

For interviews two and three, I completed amended transcripts. I particularly focused on statements that provided further depth to my initial categories or suggested new ones. Following the second interview, I reviewed the initial categories that emerged from the first two interviews and constructed tentative underlying themes. While the category labels merely classified the statements into concrete groupings (ie. rituals, special events), the themes represented underlying ideas or concepts (ie. meaning is culturally determined). The more fully developed categories and tentative underlying themes were shared with Maya at the beginning of the third interview. To further enhance trustworthiness and dependability of the data, the category groupings composed of statements from all three interviews were checked by two additional reviewers for accuracy of grouping and appropriate labeling. The identified underlying themes as well as alternative and additional themes were also discussed with an independent reviewer.

The credibility of the data was reflected in Maya's apparent ease during the interviews. While she remarked that some of the questions were difficult, her answers

were remarkably open and honest. Her ease in the discussion setting was confirmed by her statement, *“I am telling you my most personal things.”*

During the data collection with the remaining four participants, I provided transcripts of the initial interview either prior to or at the beginning of the second meeting. Participants gave me either verbal or written feedback which included clarifying and expanding on the ideas translated in the text of the initial interviews.

The data analysis procedure for the seven interviews in the main study was conducted using an inductive approach as discussed above in the pilot study procedures. However, only the underlying themes have been presented.

Reflections on the Research Process

*Always be suspicious of data collection that goes according to plan..
Halcolm's Evaluation Laws
(in Patton, 1990, p. 143)*

I suspect the above words of caution can be generalized to include the whole research process. Upon reflection, it was apparent, that all had not gone according to plan. I had chosen to transcribe all the interviews myself partly because I had the time to do so and I did not have the necessary financial resources for hiring a transcriber but also, most importantly, I had thought that transcribing the interviews would allow me to become intimately connected with the data. This intended result did not materialize as I had expected. The long and tedious process of transcribing the hours of interviews seemed to take a toll on my research enthusiasm. As opposed to immersing myself in the data, I found myself distancing from it and operating in a more mechanistic fashion than is typical of me. I remember transcribing and simultaneously wistfully hoping somewhere deep down that this would be the last tape. I am not proud of this feeling.

Somehow, it seemed to me that I had missed the point, or at the very least, I had not capitalized completely on an opportunity presented to me. This was an important learning for me -- of which there were many -- in the research process. I learned about where I excel and where I am challenged. I also was reminded to relinquish control of tasks better completed by someone else.

The writing was also arduous. It would be too much to expect that writing my thesis would be any less painful, or angst ridden, than the stories recounted by my graduate student colleagues. I was perplexed, though, by how much I struggled with the process because usually, I enjoy a challenge that sends me off in new directions and, on the whole, I like writing. My nature is to struggle, however, so perhaps it is no surprise that the research process was replete with yearnings and pullings. While, there may have been more struggle than necessary, I suspect that I needed that tension-- which is potentially inherent in any creative undertaking -- as a force to “push against.”

I have learned much during this research process, especially from the five women participants. Their stories, which are told much in their own voices, are shared in the following chapter. The final chapter contains my description of the themes and ends with a discussion of the relationship of spirituality and learning as revealed through the women’s stories.

CHAPTER 4: LISTENING TO THE STORIES

The Story of Sita: “A Spark of the Fire”

Reason is our soul's left hand, Faith her right.

By these we reach divinity.

John Donne (c. 1572–1631), English divine, metaphysical poet.

Verse Letter to the Countess of Bedford (c. 1607–8).

Sita would always greet me formally yet warmly when I arrived at her home. Sita, a small woman, has a stately presence as she carries herself with dignity. She always dressed in beautiful saris; I often felt compelled to comment on the elegance of her dress. Both Sita and her surroundings reflected a sense of class and order. Her home was impeccable, with modern Western furnishings and Indian art and decorations.

Sita was raised in a small village in the Orissa state of India and has enjoyed educational opportunities not common for other woman from her village. She received her undergraduate degree in India and completed graduate level education abroad.

Sita was married in India where she also established herself professionally. Now, in her sixties, she talked of being perceived as “only a housewife” here in Canada, and the struggles of giving up her identity which was grounded in a professional career as a psychologist and then a writer in India. Since coming to Canada over 25 years ago, her life has focused on her roles of wife, mother and grandmother.

I learned of Sita early in my search for participants because she is known locally as someone well versed in Eastern women's spirituality. When I initially met Sita at a literature conference for Asian women, I found her to be formal, yet warm, and well-spoken. When we met at her home for our initial conversation the following week, Sita's interest in and commitment to the study was immediately evident. Far from being only

interested in discussing Hinduism, Sita demonstrated a genuine interest in other religions. She often drew parallels between Hinduism and Christianity which reflected her commitment to my gaining a deeper understanding of Hinduism. In her eagerness that I gain a clear understanding of her personal story and religious heritage, she presented me with a hand-written history at the beginning of our second conversation which was audiotaped and recommended a classic reference on Hindu polytheism. I remember being somewhat overwhelmed by Sita's eagerness to take on my education but also felt pleased and rather fortunate that I had discovered someone so interested and invested in the research. Prior to our second interview, I provided Sita with a copy of the transcript. She painstakingly edited the document, correcting words that I had misunderstood and elaborating on our previous dialogue. The changes to the initial transcript and her insights between the interviews, were the focus for our third and final meeting.

An Introduction to Indian Cultural Practices

It was imperative to Sita that I gain a sound understanding of East Indian culture. *"Culture is much more than tradition and convention, rights and rituals,"* Sita instructed. It is *"something which holds us together."* Not only does culture involve language and food, but it includes spiritual practices and influences our world view. Sita's culture shapes how she sees herself in relationships and in relation to the world. As such, Sita felt it important that I learn demographic information, including cultural restrictions on women, in order to frame my understanding of Hindu traditions in India. She emphasized that class, caste, gender and age all impact personal Hindu practices.

Ensuring understanding of the caste hierarchy was particularly important to her. Sita described it to me in detail and also provided written descriptions of the *varna* (a

social order of classes) out of which evolved four broad divisions of caste. These social and class divisions date from the time of the early Aryan settlement in northern India and according to ancient scriptures, were created by the gods from the body of *Purusa*, the first man. From his head sprang the *Brahmans* and from his arms the *Kshatriyas*. The *Vaisyas* sprang from his thighs and from his feet, the *Sudras* (Bowker, 1997.) The highest level, the *Brahman* (which means “knowledge” in Sanskrit, the language from which Hindi is derived) includes learned priests who perform religious duties. The next level, *Kshatriya* (“power”) includes warriors and kings and they play political and military roles. *Vaisya* (“wealth”) include farmers, artisans traders and merchants. The lowest level, *Sudras*, (“service”) perform menial labors. Below the caste hierarchy are the *A’varna* or “untouchables.” They include those engaged in “polluting” occupations (such as animal scavenging and clothes washing). In India and in Nepal, duties and marriage possibilities are often restricted by one’s caste. Personal freedom is also affected by the castes which are both interdependent and hierarchical. There is little room for true individualism in Indian society (Dumont, 1980).

Caste restrictions have particularly impacted women. According to Sita, while women’s education initiatives introduced following India’s independence from Britain in 1947, have attempted to address and minimize caste barriers, caste continues to impact women’s work opportunities and privileges. This often translates into inequitable education opportunities which most impact older women from lower classes. Sita stated that “*the older the women are, the lower their education.*”

Sita spoke about her own educational opportunities. Her parents allowed her to express her opinions which nurtured her self confidence.

They treated me, especially my father, as an equal so I learned the skill of agreeing to disagree without getting into a quarrel. And that has been a great gift of my father and uncle to me....I think in my later life, I gained all this confidence because the men didn't treat me as a woman nor as a child.

From the Kshatriya caste herself, she felt privileged to have learned Sanskrit, the ancient language of religious texts, which is primarily restricted to Brahmin men and the upper class. Sita often provided Sanskrit interpretations during our conversations. Books were initially hand-written and knowledge and practice were simply “handed down.” Thus the practice of a “guru” teaching to a disciple is a long standing tradition which continues today. *“I am fortunate that I can learn the language”* she said. *“Through the language, I can reconnect myself with this continuous culture which has been there for 5000 years.”*

Lower caste women also experience religious restrictions as they cannot enter certain Hindu temples as they are deemed more “polluted.” Conditions are improving, though, for women in India. Every decade since independence has resulted in significant gains for the standard of living of Indian women. *“Women’s lives are changing,”* Sita said with a smile.

Sita also shared other insights on Indian culture. When I said that I perceived India as a community oriented society, Sita cautioned me about drawing sweeping conclusions. Many Indians are rather individualistic and do not work well in groups, according to her. *“Community actually means family,”* Sita continued. *“Our relationship with family is symbiotic. We need the family and the family needs us.”* From Sita’s perspective, in India, the family dominates the individual while in Canada, the reverse is true. The individual is more important in Canadian society.

“The thing about India,” Sita cautioned, is that “there is no generalization.”

While, she herself is a practicing Hindu, she reminded me that 3% of the 950 million Indians are practicing Christians while another 12% follow Muslim traditions. *“And this interview”* she reminded, is only *“one individual’s life story.”*

A Brief Look at Hinduism

*You could have golden treasure buried beneath your feet,
and walk over it again and again,
yet never find it because you don’t realize it is there.
Just so, all beings live every moment in the city of the Divine,
but never find the Divine because it is hidden by a veil of illusion.*

Chandogya Upanishad (Vedic Sacred Text)

What is Hinduism? A brief answer might be that Hinduism denotes the religions of the majority of people in India and Nepal (Flood, 1996). Over 700 million people are practicing Hindus in India alone. Hinduism, however, is a tremendously complex religious system. According to Littleton (1996), “no human belief system is more complex or variegated than Hinduism; indeed, it has been said that there are perhaps as many “little” Hindu traditions as there are villages in India (around 3.2 million)” (p. 8). Differences between Hindus might be as great as differences between Hindus and Buddhist or Christian” (Flood, 1996).

Nevertheless, underlying this vast array of local cults and rituals is a “great tradition,” which includes a tremendous body of sacred Sanskrit literature ranging from philosophical disquisitions (such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, or “Song of the Lord”) to epic tales of lost kingdoms regained and lost brides recovered (such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*). Contained in this literature are the fundamental theological tenets that have shaped Hindu thought for millennia: the transmigration of souls, the wheel of *karma* and the concept of *nirvana* - the ultimate release from the pain of death and rebirth. (Littleton, 1996, p. 9)

Sita enthusiastically chose for her pseudonym one of the most revered female

figures in Hindu sacred traditions. The two influential Hindu epics - the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* - offer a variety of images of ideal womanhood (Sugirtharajah, 1994). While the *Mahabharata* has contrasting feminine images, the image of Sita in the *Ramayana* has had a more extensive impact on Hindu society. In the story, Sita voluntarily gave up the comforts and security of palace life to follow her husband Ram into the forest for fourteen years of exile. Sita is seen as the ideal woman demonstrating devotion and fidelity (McGee, 1996).

This image of the ideal wife has not gone unchallenged, particularly in oral traditions. In the oral tradition of the *Ramyana*, Sita shows her anger and disapproval of her husband's mistreatment, thus departing from traditional norms. "She emerges as a woman who is capable of shaping her destiny and affirming her deeper self" (Sugirtharajah, 1994, p. 64). While no longer completely accepted, the "ideal wife" still "holds a good deal of legitimacy in contemporary India, both in social organization and popular culture. It is an ideal according to which Indian women are often judged and to which at least some aspire" (Khandewal, 1995, p. 9).

Most Hindu traditions follow the *Vedas*, "the scriptural bedrock of the Hindu tradition" (Novak, 1996, p. 1). In these 5000 year old Hindu scriptures, "it is recorded that we are constituted of two bodies - the corporal and the spiritual - and that it is the spiritual that defines us, sustains us, and provides meaning and purpose to our existence" (Vardey, 1996, p. xv). Many sects of Hinduism adhere to the belief that there is only one divine god; the many gods that are worshipped are aspects of a single god.

Life in all its forms is an aspect of the divine, but it appears as a separation from the divine, a meaningless cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*) determined by the purity or impurity of past deeds (*karma*). To improve one's *karma* or escape

samsara by pure acts, thought and/or devotion is the aim of every Hindu (Padavano, 1995).

“One striking feature of Hinduism is that practice takes precedence over belief.

What a Hindu does is more important than what a Hindu believes” (Flood, 1996, p. 12).

Hindu life is guided by a moral code that is exemplified by Hindu saints and heroes.

Hindus are bound by *dharma* “the principle of order that governs both the universe and individual lives” (Littleton, 1996, p. 162). This is enacted through the religious and ethical duties of the individual.

There is a tradition in India of *ascetism*. This state is considered one of the final steps on the journey for devout Hindus. It is a path followed primarily by men called *sadhus* as it involves releasing yourself from “worldly concerns” and leaving behind the “householder” responsibilities such as caring for family (Khandewal, 1995). The tremendous variety found in Hinduism is also found in ascetic traditions. In general, however, an ascetic’s time is primarily devoted to spiritual pursuits such as meditation and yoga.

The Tale of Sita

Sita was raised in a small village in Orissa, a state in East India. She has fond memories of waking to her father’s chanting each morning. As a child, she was introduced to Hindu traditions by her father and grandmother who strictly observed religious laws and spent time in religious pursuits, including reading scriptures, meditating and praying. Sita also participated in large religious celebrations and festivities organized by her mother. “*The house was decorated, all the neighbors were invited, and special festive meals were served,*” Sita recalled with warmth. At the age of

eight, like most girls, she began observing special feast days dedicated to particular deities including the *mother goddess* and *Shiva*. In the company of female relatives and friends, she fasted, chanted hymns, and then partook in communal feasts. “*Most girls at my age had two aims,*” Sita informed me. These were “*to have a loving husband, and children who will make you proud.*” The prayers of most of the women were similar, Sita elaborated. “*We asked for good fortune, health, wealth and long life for our children, husbands, siblings and parents.*” To ensure a good marriage and family, Sita had vowed to participate in the fasting and the other religious practices for twelve years; she continued until she was 20 years of age. Far from being pressured to participate, Sita was eager to belong and enjoyed taking part in the religious traditions because “*our religion is very much into celebration.*” Sita particularly enjoyed her time with the females in her community as “*when women worship at the forest grove of mother goddess or at the river bank or any other ancient shrines, they do not observe caste or class differences.*”

Sita was also influenced by her grandmother who at age nine, had been married to her then 18 year old grandfather. Illiterate at the time, her grandmother learned hymns and prayers through assisting the family priests during various celebrations. She learned to read both Sanskrit, the classical language of scripture, and Bengali, which was the language in which books were printed at that time. At the knee of her grandmother, Sita listened to the stories and epics of Hindu mythology which remain influential in her life to this day. As her grandmother was also reportedly “*a great believer in many births,*” Sita learned to appreciate the uniqueness of the human experience and entertain the existence of a “*spiritual plane of existence*” where one moves beyond the dualities of the opposites tied to the physical body and mind. Sita’s grandmother taught that “*spirit is not*

in the physical domain, but it is a reality of experience.” As Sita told me later in our conversation, *“God is not abstract, just invisible. Invisible doesn’t mean unreal to us; the visible and invisible world are both real.”*

Sita’s was a childhood of hardship quite foreign to many of us with a Western upbringing. When asked to recount a time in her life that related to her spirituality, she began to tell of the challenges that she had faced:

As a child, I suffered from malaria continuously and once, a very severe type; it is called malignant malaria. That is the one that kills you. The other one is when the malaria germ infects the brain. It is called cerebral malaria. So both of the times, I didn’t have consciousness for a long period. But I survived so that is my own personal suffering....We lived close to a flat basin so our village used to get flooded yearly. Sometimes, the flood was very devastating. Then, as you know, that part of the world also had cyclones....And then, the famine, the very infamous famine of 1944, just before the end of the war. It was partly man-made but partly also of many other things. So, I have seen personal suffering in my family....My collective memory, besides my personal memory, is also that we are quite helpless against the nature and the elements. And then of course, if you live in an Indian village, always there are snake bites, scorpion bites, and then there are kinds of fighting and there is quite a bit of violence about which people don’t talk. And if you live close to a forest like my village used to be, there are tigers which kill people and elephants which stampede your field. So you do live with a lot of misfortune.

Sita told of experiencing a “strange affinity” with the other sufferers. She considered her feeling of “solidarity and oneness with others” a spontaneous spiritual experience as it allowed a shift from being more self-centered and self absorbed:

Yeah, so what is then my spiritual thing which empowered me or which strengthened me - which helped me to survive? Well, it is a simple fact that God is protecting us and that is how we have survived. Otherwise we would have disappeared a long time back from the face of the earth. So, some of us will die, some of us will continue. I accepted that and so, whenever all these things that happened, even now, when I go through a very difficult situation or down time in my life, I will tend to see always a silver lining in a dark cloud. So, this is how I believe and that is the belief I still live with; that whatever God has done, it is for my good. I do not understand it now but it will turn out to be good.

Sita's God is not one of wrath but in her eyes is primarily *"joyous, loving, mysterious and playful...."* God is also *"...the only permanent reality."*

Sita's faith in god, she recounted, is what gives her strength. Her spirituality is quite different than her religion. It is more personal and developed as an extension of her religious practices.

Unless the field is properly prepared, you can't put a seed in it; it will not germinate, it will not grow. Similarly, in the first part of any spiritual journey, the body and mind need that kind of preparation and that is what religion tells us to do, how to live an ethical life, a moral life, how to restrain our senses, how to put some order and discipline.... But these rules, regulations, disciplines, instructions, becoming moral are a way. It is a preparation for spiritual life....So it is step by step. My spirituality...it is grounded in religion and religion has been a stepping stone. Spirituality evolved gradually. Without that stepping stone, I would not have been able to come so far.

A Return to the Source: Returning to Sacred Texts

Sacred stories remain important and guiding influences for Sita. Along with her grandmother, she credits her father with introducing her to the religious scriptures and epic literature that gave her the *"guidance and wisdom to be inner-directed."* The sacred texts continue to be influential in her own life as she now shares the stories with her own grandchildren.

Sita explained that the Hindu teachings encourage exploring the "inner being" to connect with a divine presence. *Antaryami*, another word for god in Sanskrit, can be translated as the "spirit that moves within." The Hindu teachings provided the structure for her to explore on her own.

Because there is always a structure....That's what directs you to look a certain direction....If you look into the whole sky, you won't be able to see the comet unless somebody says in what coordinates it is appearing. Very much like looking at star gazing or whatever you do, you have to focus on certain area.... If I don't see it in that direction, I say "I can't see anything." So somebody can say, "Look,

there it is!" The direction to which I will look...that structure definitely came from what I have been taught. "Look within and you will see it." But seeing or experiencing is mine.

In herself and in others, Sita looks for the invisible presence of God. *"I am a spark of the fire,"* she told me. *"Spark belongs to the fire. The fire does not belong to the spark."*

According to Sita, striving to see God's presence in other people has increased her ability to feel connected to others and to survive as a minority in a multi-cultural society. During times of challenge in Canada, while she struggled to raise her children and support her husband, Sita returned to the ancient writing for comfort and to reconnect with an inner presence. Sita is drawn to the writing as *"Any ancient writing, whether it is Judeo-Christian, or Indian or Greek...always talks about the universality of human life."*

Spirituality: The Source of Self and Meaning

While Sita's faith in god gives her strength, her spiritual identity is what gives her a sense of and confidence in her self and is the source of her personal worth. During our second interview, Sita clarified this for me. *"My spirituality helps me to know who I am."* *"How is that?"* I asked, unsure what she meant and anxious to understand.

Well, you see, I have a physical identity of course that I'm a short person with dark skin, have such hair, such face...whatever it is. So that is my physical identity. Then, my social identity; I am somebody's daughter, somebody's wife, somebody's mother. Then, what I have acquired intellectually. That I have acquired that education, a house, so much money....But is that all I am?...I don't think this is all I am. So I am something more. That is spiritual identity and that's what always makes me feel very comfortable with anybody....My spirituality tells me that just simply that I am a worthwhile person.

Life meaning is also gained through spirituality according to Sita.

People like me - being born in India as a woman in a small village are always confronting that very question - that you live a meaningless life. You are just born to die. You are born, you will produce children, do cooking and maybe catch cough and cold and die. So that is your life. That is your journey from

birth to death....So this is why we are always confronted with these questions. And so, that means, how do I find that my life is worthwhile or it has some meaning. So we have fall back to our spiritual identity.

Written words that she shared with me seemed to encapsulate her thinking. “My own ordinary and mundane existence as housewife never made me feel my life as meaningless or worthless, because at my inner core, I do feel a presence.”

The Spiritual Journey

I asked Sita what the words, *spiritual journey*, meant to her.

Spiritual journey simply means to be aware of oneself as a spiritual being....When your spirit is awakened and you experience the presence of that essential being, that experience of oneness with others, you try to live a spiritual life without denying your physical and mental life because your spiritual life is contained within your body and mind. Spirit is never separated from mind or body.

Sita’s love of metaphors became apparent once again as she told me the story of the clay lamp.

The light, the fire in the lamp is the spirit, the body is the clay pot. Without the body, the fire cannot be sustained. Separating the two of them does not make much sense to us. In Hindu ideal, it is the spirit which evolves to a form. That is what we call the body. When the body dissolves, the spirit remains. There is constant movement in creation from a state of formlessness to form...That is the way we see the whole movement...the body becoming spirit and the spirit taking form in a body.

Hindus believe that we go through many births and deaths. “A person is a spiritual being progressing, quickly or slowly, on a journey of self-transformation that transverses many lifetimes” (Khandewal, 1995, p. 202). A human rebirth is important as it allows increased consciousness and awareness. It is not enough to live a life being physically and intellectually aware. “You have to be more than that,” Sita emphasized.

Sita believes that there are many paths to reach god. “We do not think that there is only one path” she said, speaking again on behalf of her faith. “Non religious persons

who live a life of wisdom and practice compassionate concern for our world indeed are [also] spiritual.”

When I asked Sita if embarking on a spiritual path is a conscious choice, she alluded that “personal choice” is very much a Western concept.

In a Hindu and Buddhist world, until the person is ready, the spiritual quest does not arise in his heart. Even if the knowledge is given, it is not retained. This readiness comes from one's own effort and the state of his previous births.

Rationality: The Stepping Stone to Mysticism

I asked Sita if she recalled a specific time when she called into question her formal Hindu beliefs. She told of experiencing conflict in school when she discovered that two distinct explanations existed to explain scientific phenomena. Sita used “disease” as an example.

How will we overcome it? Religion has a prescribed path. This is what is causing it; God is displeased. So, if you offer a special prayer, you offer a special service, things will be okay. Whereas science explains it differently and offers different procedures to recover from it.

I was curious whether she had resolved this conflict for herself. “And what do you believe?” I asked.

In India, religious beliefs are more strong, whereas in the West, many people embrace scientific and rational thinking. They usually see various categories in conflict with each other, reason and intuition, facts and feelings...rationality and mysticism. Whereas for us, rationality is the stepping stone to mysticism. ...When you come to the boundary and reason can't take you anymore, then you fall back on intuition.

Anxious that I understand, Sita continued, “I always accept reason....Always everything has to be examined and reasoned out. [But] when I know this part is beyond reason...beyond the logic, that is where intuition and mysticism come in. Faith is never blind faith.”

Reflections on Sita's Story

Throughout the interviews, Sita's acceptance of herself and others, which she attributes to her spirituality, was most evident. Her spirituality, which affirms her validity as a worthwhile person, is a great source of comfort and support. *"I am neither a monk, nor an aesthetic nor a religious person,"* explained Sita. *"I am a housewife, happy to be a housewife and within that constraint, I practice my spirituality."* Her spirituality also helps her to find meaning in her everyday life which leads to a sense of acceptance and contentment. Without it, she would be an unhappy person, Sita assured me, as she would be continually measuring her worth through other people's eyes. Sita recognized that her spirituality profoundly influences her daily life. It *"helps me stay engaged with life without being burdened by it. I stay connected with my core"* Sita told me. *"I have to have an inner life to survive as a sane person."* Her inner life grew from her deep connections with her Indian culture and religious roots which remain sustaining and grounding for her even after living almost three decades in Canada.

The Story of Maya: Spirituality Through a Nepali Woman's Eyes

I first met Maya through mutual Nepali friends. I sensed an early comfort in her company, partially due to her warm and engaging personality and partially due to our mutual interest in and fondness for Nepal. I initially contacted Maya by telephone and asked her to participate in an interview for a class assignment. At that time, I briefly explained the purpose of the research. I also assured her that her answers would remain confidential and that participation in this initial interview in no way obligated her to be part of the main study.

During our first interview which took place in my home over a pot of tea and homemade bread, I invited her to share her own spirituality and religious experiences. I had initially planned to use a list of specific questions and conduct a semi-structured interview. I shared my questions with Dr. Jean Clandinin, who suggested that I choose a few key questions and then just see where it goes. Heeding her advice, I did just that. I also included other key points that I wanted to address in my interview schedule. (See Appendix B).

As this was my first interview, I remember feeling somewhat overwhelmed when I picked Maya up for the interview. This is salient to me, as I also recall feeling energized, and amazed by the change, at the completion of our conversation. We began chatting informally during which time the participant chose her own pseudonym. (The initial pseudonym was changed again during subsequent interviews as the participant felt her initial choice might not have ensured her confidentiality. Early transcripts were revised in order to reflect the final choice of “Maya”.) The initial recorded interview was approximately 40 minutes in length.

Following the initial pilot interview, Maya expressed interest in being part of the main study. It was clear that “living the questions” was also meaningful for her. While it was apparent that we had established a warm connection, her interest extended beyond shared company. During a telephone conversation, shortly after our first interview, she excitedly commented that after our discussion, she had returned home and had started writing about some of her experiences. Maya consented to being the primary participant in the pilot study. She and I met twice more and the interviews were once again audio-recorded. The second and third interviews took place in her home in the spring of 1997.

A Walk Through Maya's Story

Maya is a Hindu Nepali woman who has lived with her husband and children in Canada for five years. She has lived most of her life in Kathmandu, Nepal where her mother, two sisters and brother still live. Over 90% of Nepalis practice Hinduism and the social structure of Nepal is based on the Hindu caste system (Littleton, 1996). Hinduism, in Nepal, is different again from the Hinduism in India. Buddhist influences are apparent in the Hindu philosophies and practices in Nepal. Though a minority of Nepalis practice Buddhism, it is a thriving religion in Nepal. The Hindus and Buddhists co-exist with marked compatability. For example, Hindus recognize Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, as an incarnation of *Vishnu*, their preserver God.

Maya is a member of the Newari culture, the indigenous peoples in the Kathmandu valley. She married into the Joshi caste, which is the Newari equivalent to the Brahmin caste – the highest in the hierarchy. English is Maya's third language; she also speaks her native Newari and Nepali, the national language of Nepal.

It was apparent that Maya had been reflecting upon an earlier telephone conversation during which I had described the purpose and method of the study. The first interview had just begun when she eagerly began to share her story.

When I talked to you on the phone about this spirituality, it came to mind about how I was raised in my family, and how I am influenced by mom. I developed my way of spirituality from my culture where I was born. But it's more from my mom. When I was small, many religious performance were going on [in] the house. My mom encouraged me to take part. Besides that, my mom used to organize mini - performances. Then, she wants me and my two sisters to take part in that performance. So, it became a habit.

I asked Maya about how she felt about taking part in *performances* remembering my own reluctance to attend church as a child. "Oh, I felt I must take part," she replied.

“*You must. It’s a requirement?*” I asked again wondering if her experience was similar to mine. This was one of the many times during our interviews where having to communicate in English, her third language, proved somewhat confusing and felt limiting. “*It’s not a requirement. It’s not compulsory,*” she clarified. “*It’s your choice.*”

Maya’s spirituality is centered in her formal Hindu beliefs that she learned during the *performances*. Her spiritual practices focus on Hindu rituals including *pujaa* (offering a ceremonial dinner to the Gods). *Performance* relates to *pujas* where many people attend. Rather than worshipping a single God, Hindus pay homage to various Gods and images who represent different aspects of a greater God. “*In Nepal, every house has statues of Gods and Goddesses... We call “murti” in Nepali, you know?*” Aware that I was keen to increase my minimal knowledge of the Nepali language, Maya would often add the Nepali translations, which amused us both. “*Normally in every house, we have Saraswati [Goddess of music and education], Lakshmi [Goddess of wealth], you know, there are various names. And in terms of Gods, we have Ganesh [God of luck], Krishnaji [reincarnation of Vishnu, the preserver God], and Shiva [the destroyer.]*

Maya regularly performed *pujaa* each morning and evening while living in Nepal and continues those practices here in Canada. *Pujaa* involves making offerings (of food and flowers) to the Gods, saying readings for the Gods (*path*) and fasting (*brata*). As I was anxious to hear the details of her practice in Nepal, Maya continued. “*You do early in the morning. You take bath, and you put on clean clothes. Then you visit the temple with a lot of stuff. And then after that, we eat only supper.*” She also told of her own practices here in Canada in more detail.

I touch the feet of God in my forehead. After that, I have to do path. Path is you read something written about the God. I am not comfortable without reading that. I have read path for such a long time...I do fasting on the Tuesday. Every Tuesday, I drink tea and then at the lunch time, I have some fruits and milk. For supper, I eat roti - (bread). I won't take rice and meat that day.. This I have been doing for more than ten years.

Maya's dedication to her practices appeared highly related to her immediate as well as her extended family. *"I saw my mom, my aunties, my cousins, my grandparents...They took "brata" (fasting) we call in Nepali. We have a special name in Newari. So, I got influence from them and I also want to take one [take fast.]* Maya's ritual practices have also been supported by her in-laws. Her mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law have been particularly influential.

Mom (in-law) and grandma (in-law) used to worship everyday, every morning....I just did pranam (short pujaa) in the morning and then my grandmother-in-law got sick. So, that responsibility came on me. I started to do that pujaa garnu daily.

I found myself wondering if her mother-in-law's influence followed her to Canada. *"What do you think your mother-in-law would think if you quit doing pujaa while you were here?,"* I asked.

"She won't be happy. She can share her opinion, that it's not good to stop and ask 'Why are you stopping,?' but she can't force me to do pujaa."

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that Maya is strongly committed to her ritual practices. I wondered what motivated her to carry out her daily rituals. *"I have to do that,"* she said referring to completing her pujaa each morning. *"If I have to go out somewhere early in the morning, I will wake up early to make time for those things and I will do!"* Set in my own mindset which was focused on 'why,' I continued to probe.

When I asked why she performs pujaa and other rituals, several key reasons were apparent. Maya completes her pujaa because *“I believe in God and I want to do something for the God...I am sharing some of myself to the God.”* It also became clear that Maya does *pujaa* as it is expected by *dharma*, required duties which are dictated by culture.

“Do you feel closer to God when you do that?” I asked.

“I never think that way,” Maya replied. *“I am doing what I am supposed to do, for the God.”* When I asked her to elaborate on *dharma*, Maya patiently continued. *“Culture things...have to do things. We have been doing since many, many years. We are told that we have to do this; it's a continuation of culture...And as you know, Nepal is very famous for its religion,”* she said with sureness. Looking for connections, I asked, *“Within your Newari culture, is it the women that are often the ones that do the worshipping in homes?”*

“Oh, yeah, not the men so much,” she replied. *“But...sometimes men do too.”*

Convinced that there were other deeper meanings, beyond the rituals, I continued to probe. It became clear, in fact, that the meanings that Maya assigned to the *pujaa* were largely culturally determined.

Everything has its meaning in our culture but even I don't know the meaning of all those things. Our priest, he tells us kothaa [story] and that story has a lot of meaning. That story indicates that the pujaa garne [offering to the Gods] and brata [fasting] are very good. You are giving your time and commitment and trust.

Though the primary reasons for continuing *pujaa* in Canada appeared related to cultural norms, the *pujaa* also afforded her personal time. Saying her mantra and reciting readings also provided comfort. *“You said that when life isn't going so well and you're feeling*

sad, you say your mantra over and over again and it gives you comfort. Why does it give you comfort?" I asked.

"Maybe, it's my means of holding something. I don't know. Maybe, it's a friend of mine," Maya responded.

"So, when you're saying the mantra, what is that doing?" I probed further.

After a long pause, Maya responded, *"I'm saying something of God's word."*

Dharma, which determines the realm of heaven you will go to after you die, is closely linked to "neighborly" behavior as well as the practice of *pujaa*.

That's a kind of dharma in Nepal. There is a belief that if you are very rich, when you die, you can't take your money. The only thing that goes with you is the dharma you do. Practically, if you are nice to people, if you help the people, that is dharma. Pujaa garne (doing puja) is also a kind of dharma. And taking fasting, that is dharma. And in our culture, you respect the elders, that is dharma. You behave good. Like if somebody is coming to your house, you ask him or her, how are you and if it's supertime, "Have you had supper? If not, come sit down with us." That is also dharma.

What is Spirituality?

While the women in Maya's immediate and extended family shaped her religious practices, it was her father who encouraged philanthropic behaviors. *"This I got from my father. I want to help other people as long as I can."* Maya reported that her mom was more spiritual than her dad but it was from him, that she learned to "do good" for other people.

I look at my dad's side, my grandpa, my dad, my brothers, me, my sister...we are all kind of people. Sometimes it's good and sometimes, it's bad. Bad in the sense that we are concerned with other people. Sometimes, we spend a lot of time with our friends. Mom says "you guys got it from your dad."

It was clear early in our conversations that the wording of my questions was problematic. Van Manen (1984) discusses the difficulty of using words to refer to

phenomena that have lost some of their original meaning. I worried this might be true of *spirituality* which in the West has become somewhat of a “catch all” category referring to various religious experiences that are unconnected with formal religious institutions. While the term spirituality was confusing to Maya, it was not due to overuse. On the contrary, spirituality proved to be a troubling concept partially because an equivalent word does not exist in Newari, her mother tongue or Nepali, her second language. When I asked Maya what the word spirituality meant to her during our first interview, she appeared unsure and asked for clarification. *“Spirituality...is it something related to religion or is it different from that?”* In my attempt to not influence her opinion, I offered a vague response which focused on spirituality as being highly personal and defined differently for each person. Later during the first interview, Maya offered that, *“To me, spirituality is... do something for myself, and do what is good for everybody.”* Spirituality appeared to relate to helping people which may be separate from religion in her mind. During our final conversation, we once again spoke of spirituality. *“It’s a part of religion to me, it’s a part of personal interest and personal choice too. My family, we are the type of people who want to help. In return, we are also helped by those people we help.”*

“Is that part of religion? Is that part of spirituality?” I asked, unintentionally confusing the issue.

“Yes, I think,” Maya responded slowly.

“Why would you help other people?” I asked.

Not surprisingly, Maya replied, *“Just my conscience tells me to do that.”*

The Concept of Journey

When asked to describe her spiritual journey, Maya was, at first, perplexed. At the first interview, Maya said:

For my journey. .. as I mentioned, my religion which I have been doing, and one is, I would like to help friends and families and my kids. I don't want to upset them. I will allow them as long as I can. My journey is my career too.

During the second interview, Maya added:

In the last interview, when I talked to you about the spiritual things, I think I concentrated my spiritual journey only in religion. After that, I thought, what is my journey? In a day, what I did, that is my journey. I go to school, I wake up, I do my path and pujaa garne, pack a lunch for my sons, pack a lunch for myself, go go go. Every minute I have something to do. All those things, isn't that journey? I got a sense, a feeling, all those things, that is journey. I have been running, running, running for so many years. I don't know how many years I have to run, the same pattern.

The religious rituals and their purposes, familial and cultural influences, spirituality and spiritual journeys shed light on the narrative that is Maya's story. To gain a deeper understanding of her experiences, we must look even deeper to the themes that underly these categories. According to van Manen (1984),

themes are...like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus experienced as meaningful wholes. Themes are the stars that make up the universe of meaning we live through. It is by the light of these themes that we can navigate and explore such universes (p. 59).

The "Stars" in Maya's Narrative

A central theme running through Maya's story is that of "externalness." Sources of meaning, learning and acceptable behavior are largely defined externally. Meaning and learning is culturally determined and is derived from Hindu written and verbal stories which are shared by family members or by religious figures.

Those stories tell you to be good in two ways, in practical way and in spiritual way. In a practical way, don't kill anyone. In Nepal, you even can't kill some of the animals. Don't hurt anybody. And side by side, they tell to do puja, do path.

When I asked Maya to think of a time of struggle in her life and how her spiritual practices were affected during this time, she once again returned to religious stories.

Actually, I don't have evidence of that. But in our stories of religion, there is much evidence, many narratives that because of praying, the Gods changed. There are many examples of your question. In our holy books, in our stories, many many. Bagvad Gita, Ramayan, Maharbarata, Those are really really good books. You read more and you learn more. My mom knows a lot about that. I learned from my mom.

Maya's personal sense of self and meaning is derived from being part of the culture. She performs religious practices as that is what is required for members of that culture. This is especially true for Nepali women; her religious practices define her as a Nepali woman. It is from being a Nepali woman that she derives her own sense of self.

"I believe in God but I cannot take apart [separate] those things [performing puja] from God. Being Hindu, being Nepali woman. I will do that as long as I can move my two hands. Because I am a Nepali woman and I want to continue that culture.

Maya's difficulty defining herself outside the context of her culture and my own biases were demonstrated in the following conversation. "Does your spirituality help you understand yourself?" I queried.

"This is the question that all the time bothers me," she replied. "Who am I and how I belong? I don't know who I am."

"So, the hard part is not spirituality, the hard part is understanding yourself? That's the hard part of this question?"

"Understanding yourself...Yeah, that's the hard part." Maya concurred..

“So, when you say it’s hard to think about yourself, to think about ‘who I am’ and ‘how I learn?’ Do you think about that stuff?” I continued in the same vein.

“Yes, I think about that stuff, like who I am. In Nepali religion, you try to know who you are, where you come from, where you have to go.”

“Who says that?” I asked.

“That’s our priest.”

“So when he says you have to know who you are, what does he mean? About your family...?”

“No, not about family,” Maya clarified. *“What I understand is...like if you pinch yourself, it hurts you as it will others. If I pinch somebody, it will hurt them.”*

Along with the external sense of meaning also comes an external sense of control and power and perhaps a reduction of personal control. Maya trusts that God knows everything and can anticipate her needs *“so I don’t have to ask him.”* She performs *pujaa*, however, in part to ensure her own safety and security and that of others close to her as *“I am afraid of God. I [also] believe in that God. I am sure that he will make everything okay for me,”* she concluded.

In lieu of the fact that Maya defines and sustains herself in terms of her culture and her spirituality and religious practices assist her in doing so, it is perhaps not surprising that she views her spiritual journey as including all parts of our life.

Reflections on Maya’s Story

While I thoroughly enjoyed Maya’s company during our conversations, I was aware that she was not responding as I would have liked. Her descriptions of and reflection on performing *pujaa* seemed to lack the “depth” I was looking for. Over the

course of our conversations, I became aware that Maya did not typically analyze her ritual practices. When she listed Gods and Goddesses that she worshipped, it reminded me all too much of my initial reaction to Hinduism during my first visit to Nepal in 1989. There, I thought, it was idol worship; it made me nervous and caught me off guard. My harsh judgment of and reaction to Hinduism and my inclination to distance myself at that time, were reflected in a verse that I wrote while living in Kathmandu:

They've so many Gods and rituals to follow,
The caste system and women's roles, I find hard to swallow.
As celebrations go, we differ by a mile,
I guess animal sacrifice just isn't my style.

As I read the words now, some nine years later, I am taken aback by their severity. With a more recent return visit to Nepal and India behind me, my views have softened. I have since traveled with a former Hindu monk in India. He shared with me other understandings of Hinduism that seemed to soften and reinterpret the idolatry that I had rejected.

Certainly, it was not only the polytheistic rituals involved in Hinduism that made me uncomfortable. I was most frustrated by the limitations placed on women inherent in the caste system. I was anxious for Maya to tell me that she had reflected deeply on her religion of origin as had many spiritually oriented women from the West. They often distanced themselves from their religions, particularly when faced with patriarchal ideals. But Maya had not done this, and I was forced to come to terms with the “ideal” spiritual progression that I projected.

The Story of Taja: Following the Path of a Guru

*One should follow the wise, the intelligent,
the learned, the much enduring, the dutiful, the noble;
one should follow a good and wise man,
as the moon follows the path of the stars.*

(Dhammapada, 208, Hindu sacred text)

The Crossing of Paths

Taja's energy was apparent when we first met. She was mingling with ease among women who also had attended the Satya Sai Baba service. Satya Sai Baba, raised as a Hindu, is a spiritual guide living in India who is known for his ability to perform miracles. He has many followers, both of Eastern and Western origin, who widely regard him as a manifestation of god. It was at a service, honoring this well known spiritual guru, that I met Taja in the spring of 1997. I had learned of the temple and the service through a local East Indian Women's Association. *"You will find many women interested in spirituality there,"* the representative had said. I arrived to find myself at the back of a large hall with the men seated on the floor on one side and the women on the other. The men's side was a sea of white kurta, traditional Indian pants and tunics. The women's, in contrast, was a kaleidoscope of brilliant saris and Punjabi suits. I remember noting few Westerners in the crowd as I leaned against a wall at the back, feeling somewhat awkward. The service was involved singing and children being recognized for their achievements in their religion classes. I was reminded of and surprised by the similarity to my growing up in a United Church community where similar celebrations were held to acknowledge the completion of events in Sunday School.

Following the service, I met Taja who was engaged in a sea of conversations. I had been given her name prior to the service as someone who might be interested in

participating. Her colorful sari and long black hair reminded me of the many women I had met and admired while I was in India. Her involvement and social presence in the community was quite apparent. We only spoke briefly then as an anniversary celebration was about to begin upstairs and, of course, Taja was involved. As Taja enthusiastically agreed to be part of the study, we met the next week for an initial audio-taped interview and shortly thereafter for a second interview as Taja was leaving for India in the near future. I shared the transcripts with her after her return. I wanted her feedback and wondered if new ideas had surfaced during her travels in India. Our final conversation took place in December, 1997.

My Conversations with Taja

The familiar and welcoming smell of incense was ever present during my conversations with Taja, which took place at her home. During my first visit, I was struck by the commanding size and location of a ceiling high photo of her spiritual guru, Satya Sai Baba, which graced a feature wall in her living room. Dressed in Western clothing, she greeted me warmly and led me downstairs where the interviews took place. The length of one wall was covered with numerous framed and decorated photos of Hindu gods and goddesses. Among them were *Ganesha*, the elephant god known to remove obstacles, *Saraswati*, the goddess of music and education and *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth as well as well as extended family photos and more pictures of Satya Sai Baba. Here, we settled ourselves on the cushioned floor, as she told me her story.

Following our initial interview, she led me upstairs to a closet that she had converted into another spiritual space. It was decorated with religious photos and it is there that incense burned continually. Excitedly, she showed me words of her spiritual

guru that gave her comfort and guidance. “*Fear not for I am here,*” read the well-worn card. The joy that Taja feels when speaking about her spirituality was evident early in the first interview. Her enthusiasm permeated most of her words. I remember feeling tired and deflated prior to the first interview and, as such, feeling rejuvenated and refreshed following it, was an unexpected and welcome surprise.

Taja felt that it was no accident that she and I had met and that she was a participant in this research.

For some reason, he wants you to see... This is no accident. Everybody, like you and I, are related karmically. That is why you and I are speaking today. You and I met that day. It is not chance; it is not coincidence; it's a divine plan. There are so many people. We could all know each other, but do we? No we don't unless karma plays a part, it will not bring us together.

I had used the pseudonym “Taja” in my preliminary research notes. At the beginning of the initial interview when I asked her to choose a pseudonym, she enthusiastically accepted the name that I had chosen, as if this too was part of divine intervention. Such a theme was pervasive in Taja’s demeanor and stories. There is a control out there, greater than she or I or all else for that matter, and that control is materialized in the form of an Indian guru named Satya Sai Baba.

India is the spiritual seat of the world according to Taja and thus, the home to many forms of traditional and less formalized spiritual practices. Westerners are drawn to India due, in part, to a spiritual sense that permeates the atmosphere. India is the home of numerous ashrams where spiritual practices, such as meditation, can be learned and developed and also of spiritual teachers who guide and may demonstrate the process. Sai Baba is a prominent spiritual guru who has many both Eastern and Western followers.

I first encountered Sai Baba in a photo on my first trip to India in 1989. Sai Baba, I thought then, and still do, is odd looking for an Indian man, as he sports a full, almost spherically shaped hairstyle which did not fit with my view of the stereotypical male Indian guru. As I traveled through India, I encountered various people who had met Sai Baba and my curiosity was piqued. I learned that one of his main “Sai Centres” was located near Bangalore in southern India. Upon arrival in Bangalore to visit local Indian friends, I began to make inquiries. My friends were orthodox Christians and were neither interested in nor supportive of my quest to find out more about Sai Baba. When I discovered that the Sai Centre was in fact a five hour bus trip from Bangalore, I became increasingly more determined to find out more about what I could expect before I embarked on yet another seemingly endless Indian bus ride.

There was a local Sai Centre contact office to which my Indian host begrudgingly escorted me. I was amazed that the person in attendance could or would tell me nothing about the activities at the centre out of town except that “it was wonderful” or something equally vague. I was not persuaded that the potential benefits outweighed the daunting bus ride so I chose not to visit the centre. I did not make this decisions lightly as I suffer rather impressively from the human condition of “not wanting to miss out”. As luck or perhaps fate would have it, following a stay of several days in Bangalore, I boarded a train bound for Bombay and occupied a berth close to a fellow who had just lived a “spell” at the Sai Centre. It was of course, “the most amazing experience of his life” and I remember suffering severe pangs of regret through much of that long journey to Bombay.

When I recounted this story to Taja, she was even more convinced (if that were possible) that she and I were destined or perhaps “designed to meet.”

Taja’s Story

Taja has now been in Canada over 25 years living initially in Toronto and, for the past 15 years, in Edmonton. She is a busy women, active with a full-time career and volunteer commitments. As she informed me during our initial interview, “*hands that help are holier than lips that pray,*” and “*service to man is service to god.*” These are words of Satya Sai Baba. Taja often quoted him during our conversations. His words appeared to guide and comfort her. In addition to her professional and volunteer roles, Taja also has the responsibilities of being a wife and mother of three children in their

teens and early 20s. Though she has lived in Canada for much of her life, it was clear during our conversations that Taja's Indian roots remain most important to her.

Taja was born in Madras, a southern India city, and learned to speak Tamil and Hindi before English. She studied in English at a convent school. Her father died when she was just a toddler and so she was raised in Bombay by her mother and extended family. The influence of her grandparents is evident in her early religious memories as she said, *"My grandfather was very, very religious man and so was my grandmother....He [her grandfather] used to teach us prayers - to do things in routine - the way you are supposed to conduct your life."*

Taja's early religious memories were ones of community. She spoke fondly of the various Hindu festivals she had attended. *"Everybody does more or less the same thing, it's always a festive atmosphere."* Taja told of the ritual of braiding flowers into garlands under the watchful eye of her grandfather which is a skill that she delights in sharing to this day with others at the "Sai-fold" (a term used to represent the community at the Satya Sai Baba temple.) *"Every Wednesday afternoon, after you came from school, you had your rest and everybody would sit down and do these garlands. It gave us immense joy because it was a collective family thing that we did together."* Taja told of her grandfather's insistence that each photo of the various Hindu gods and goddesses that were displayed in their home be decorated with just the right sized garland. When I asked her why garlands were placed on the pictures, she replied that *"you want to glorify god. You want to adore god....When you love something, you want to make it look beautiful."*

Garlands were also placed on Shirdi Sai Baba, the earlier incarnation of Satya Sai Baba. Taja had learned of Shirdi Sai Baba through her paternal grandmother who during

a time of great sorrow had had a vision of a tree breaking open and Shirdi Sai Baba saying to her, *“Why fear when I am here? I’ll help you.”* Shirdi Sai Baba died in the 1920s saying *“Don’t worry. In eight years, I will come again,”* which was when Satya Sai Baba was born. Satya Sai Baba was not readily accepted as Shirdi’s true incarnation until he demonstrated knowledge that only Shirdi Sai Baba could have. Taja told me with excitement that her elder brother who frequently visited Shirdi Sai Baba’s mosque had experienced this himself. When he met Satya Sai Baba for the first time, Sai Baba greeted him with an embrace and the words, *“you were my Shirdi devotee.”*

Taja has a strong belief in reincarnation as Satya is to die and return again as Prema Sai Baba. Satya Sai Baba teaches that *“the good fortune that has brought you face to face with Me is something for which you must thank your merit won through previous lives.”* Along with Taja’s belief in reincarnation comes her awareness of *“karma,”* the cause and effect of action.

If you are suffering and think, “I’m being good but I’m suffering,” you just have to think back a little. What did you do in previous lifetimes? It doesn’t have to be the immediately previous one, it could have been three or four lifetimes ago.

She also has a firm belief, that one is “called” by Satya Sai Baba only when one is ready.

Satya Sai Baba: A Spiritual Guru

The term *guru* can be defined as a “teacher of religious knowledge or conveyor of spiritual insight and liberation (*moksha*)” (Bowker, 1997, p. 394). In the Hindu tradition, the origins of the idea of people serving as channels for divine knowledge can be found in ancient Hindu texts, including the *Veda*. Conceptions of a guru vary from that of one

who is identical with God and conveys liberation, to that of the guru as a guide, who shows the way but does not actually bestow liberation.

Satya Sai Baba is viewed by many worldwide and by the spiritual guides himself as a manifestation of god and all that is divine. The term *satya* in the Hindi language actually means truth. As Sai Baba said at a World Sai Baba Conference in Bombay, India in 1968, *“This human form of Sai is one in which every divine entity, every divine principle, that is to say all the Names and Forms ascribed by man to god, are manifest”* (in Mason & Laing, 1987, p. 113). Taja spoke of there being many manifestations of God which are, in fact, all one. *“Everyone of them is him,”* Taja would say.

She talked of the importance of Hindu gods and goddesses and their embodiment in Satya Sai Baba.

You need a goddess first; you need to pray to somebody; that's what man is made of....We need certain things. We need somebody to teach us to study for the music and knowledge and whatever. We've got Saraswati for that. We need wealth. We have Lakshmi for that. You know what I'm saying. We need somebody to remove all the obstacles from our path; we've got Ganesh for that. Lord Ganesha - the elephant god. Okay? Then, we need somebody who will destroy all the evils; we've got Shiva for that. We need somebody to maintain this entire universe - to keep the peace around- we've got Vishnu for that. See they are all different faces of the same god.

“And they're all faces of Sai Baba?” I asked with less than skillfully concealed skepticism.

“They are all the faces,” she replied.

According to Taja, Satya Sai Baba is capable of speaking any language. He also appears to people in the spiritual forms that they worship. *“He has proven that to a lot of people who have a belief in Jesus. They see him and then suddenly he transforms and he is Jesus,”* Taja explained.

"He can change his shape?" I asked.

"Yes, he appears to you as to who you want him to be...whatever is in your heart's desire....If Rada is really close to you, he will appear to you as Rada...But your sincerity has to be there."

"And if you're really sincere, will you see him physically in that form?" I clarified.

"Yes, as a vision, you'll see." Taja replied with her unflinching faith and enviable enthusiasm.

Not only is Satya Sai Baba known for his ability to change his form for those who truly believe but he also materializes sacred objects including *mibuti* (holy ash). At the completion of our first interview, Taja retrieved a photo album that included pictures of her most recent visit to India where she had met Sai Baba. The photos showed him officiating at a wedding where he materialized a sacred thread used in the ceremony.

"You're lucky," Taja told me. "Not everybody can see these photographs. He figures you need to see it for whatever reason." She also told me of a video she had seen that showed Sai Baba materializing a gold watch for a boy. He handed it to the youth with the words, *"Time is god. Don't waste time. Time wasted is life wasted."*

Meeting Her God

Taja learned of Satya Sai Baba in the early 1980s but did not adopt and begin to personally follow his teachings until some seven years later. She was given her first photo of Sai Baba by her brother's mother-in-law who was visiting Canada. Taja was told, *"you believe in him...he is god."* At that time, she added his picture to her altar but reportedly *"never thought about it very much."* She was struggling at that time with

living away from friends and family she had met while living in Eastern Canada for several years and was in her words, *“still in my own little quagmire.”* Taja introduced her three children to Sai Baba through classes recommended by her friend but it was not until, she and the children participated in *Bhajan*, Sai Baba devotional songs, that Taja became an active participant. *“He brought me in through music,”* Taja said smiling. She clearly believed that the onset of her awakening was through the will of Sai Baba. *“You will not come to me until I call you.,”* teaches Sai Baba. Taja clarified this for me:

The way he says is everybody is a flower; we are all buds. And all buds don't bloom at the same time. Every bud blooms only when it's time for it to bloom in a garden. Right? So he says 'All of you will bloom, when I give the word.' You can make all the plans to go see him, but unless he wills it, it will not happen.

Taja described the turning point in her spiritual development with tears welling in her eyes. She told of looking at a poster of Satya Sai Baba that one of her children's spiritual teachers had brought back from India. Inscribed on the photo were the words,, *“No one is a stranger to me. I know each and every one of you.”*

One day, in 1986, I remember this so clearly. I was sitting and I was in my own mind. All these thoughts...all these emotions. Nobody was home....I don't know why...that day, I was really down. And I kept looking at that picture, and I said, “Fine, you say you know me and my problems, show me.” (The tears began to roll down her cheeks.) “If you know my problems, then, you also know, I don't know what to do anymore. I have all these weight on my shoulders. I'm going to give them all to you. I surrender everybody including myself.” And I still remember, I felt a peace... something...went right through me and out of my toes (Her tears began to subside.)...That day, he took the fear out of me. I was always afraid of what will happen and... very unsure. But that day he proved and I've never doubted him.

“And that was 1986?” I asked, eager to keep a chronology of her complex story which at times was confusing.

1986, but that was my very first experience and since then, lot of things have happened. And he's always been there. But he's said, in many ways, “You have

to be good. I will help you but you have to be good. I will not let you go but I want you to be good and I want you to do good, see good, think good.” I’m not saying I’m perfect....I’m not saying any of that. I have my moments... I have my emotions... but it makes me think more. But that experience is something that I don’t expect anybody to understand ’till they have experienced something themselves that way.

I was curious about and touched by her tears during the retelling of her story. “*Tell me about your tears....Are they tears of just remembering that time?*”

“*Yeah,*” she responded. “*...And the joy too because that day, he opened himself to me. See, he opened me up.*” (Her tears welled and began flowing again).

And, he also said, “You are never alone. I am there for you.” And lately, lot of things have happened [to other people] in the Sai Centre. When he says, “Why fear when I am here” he has literally shown that....And we all wonder, my goodness, if it hadn’t been for him, certain things that happened would have been really disastrous for the people involved.

Be good, Do good, See good: Taja’s Words to Live By

Religion is a concept that is bound by rules and regulations and what you do, what you should not do and your beliefs....But spirituality to me is you take that religion and what it tells you and put it into practice in your daily life.

“Be good, do good, see good” are the words of her guru which guide her spiritual life.

It is clear that Satya Sai Baba is the guiding voice in Taja’s life. Taja has visited India more than once to see him. She regularly reads “Sai literature” and attends *Bhajan*, devotional chant celebrations. Satya Sai Baba not only affects her religious life but, also shapes much of her existence. As Sai Baba teaches that “*hands that help are holier than lips that pray,*” Taja sought volunteer work and now feeds a handicapped woman three times a week. While her husband supports her spiritual practices, he becomes frustrated when Taja is out of the house much of the time. She encourages her children to follow

Sai Baba and thinks her daughter is, in fact, “an old soul” for her marked ability to meditate.

I believe people who can mediate really are old souls who had the spiritual practice for many, many, many, many, many lifetimes. So, they bring that with them. And those of us who are younger, soul-wise - not body-wise, who are younger, have to learn that.

At the time of the interviews, Taja was planning to begin regular mediation practice. “Tell me why we meditate,” I asked.

Meditation is very good because it calms the mind, it calms the body. The eternal question of “who am I?” It lets you go and see your inner self. And discover the god that’s within you. That’s what god said. You are looking for me all over the place. I am right inside of you. Find me there...[Meditation] does a lot - spiritual progress plus personal progress. It helps with a calm mind.

It was clear that Sai Baba also has a great influence on Taja’s “inner life.” Satya Sai Baba influences her view of herself and provides constant comfort and personal support. Sai Baba teaches “Take one step forward, I shall take a hundred towards you; shed one tear, I will wipe a hundred from your eyes” (in Mason & Laing, 1987, p. 1).

Taja’s perception and choice is for Sai Baba to be in control. “He is the puppeteer; we are the puppets and he pulls our strings. And it’s amazing how he does it. And only experiences can teach you that he really is in control and you are not in control.... Yet, while Sai Baba is the ultimate control, Taja maintains that she has the “discriminating power.” “He teaches you all the good things. He shows you the way. He gives you all the tools, How do you use them? He gives you the discriminating power.”

“How does it feel knowing that he’s in control?” I asked.

It feels good because when you surrender to him, your surrender yourself, he knows what you need and he gives it to you. Sometimes, you don’t like what he

gives, but if you take it in the right way, you get more than what you ever asked for....Today, if I am smiling...I feel very light in my heart, it is because I have somebody to fall back on. He is a pillar; he is a wall. He is the basis of my life and he is the one who is constant. Even if I'm not here, he is going to be here. I'll come back and he'll still be there. I have parents; I have a husband; I have children. I have friends in the community....They are all here today - gone tomorrow. You never know what tomorrow will bring - what the next moment will bring. They are all transitory people. But he's my constant. He is somebody I can always run to who will never, never, never let me down - who will never hurt me - who'll always pick me up.

Religion and Spirituality

Taja believed that all religions are facets of the same truth which, according to her, explains the many similarities between them. While Taja was a firm believer that one is called to a spiritual journey, she also recognized that discovering spirituality is also partly a personal decision.

You find an empty spot in yourself. It doesn't matter... you can have everything in the world but you're still lonely. You're still missing something and I think that missing something is that spirituality. The yearning for the spiritual journey. Because once you find it, you find everything else falls aside and you are just able to concentrate on that because that gives you contentment.

Reflections on Taja's Story

Following our initial interview, I remember being struck that Taja's life was guided by a divine plan. There are few accidents and much of life is beyond her personal control in Taja's world view. Perhaps that was the sense that gave Taja so much comfort and security and why I often felt lighter following our conversations. Taja's life is about relationship with a greater power, and her power is Sai Baba. While I inwardly harshly judged her apparent willingness to give up internal and personal control and responsibility, I remember being acutely aware of her sense of releasing her burdens and how much relief was apparent for Taja in surrendering herself and troubles to Sai Baba. "I

always get a sense from you,” I shared, “...that there is such comfort knowing that he is in control. But do you ever feel like...My god! I’ve given my power away.” “I don’t have any,” Taja responded. “I don’t want it.”

Taja talked of being struck annually with a bout of depression and how her connection with Sai Baba helped give her comfort and strength in these times. She viewed her problems as a test from God, and while Sai Baba is her base and her constant, the power to choose resides within herself. *“He gives us the discriminating power,”* she would often comment.

“Spirituality brings about contentment,” she told me in our second conversation. *“Do good, see good, be good,”* Taja reminded me frequently. *“When they say, look for God in everybody. That’s what you are doing when you see good. That is where you see the divinity.”*

Living her Buddhist Philosophy: The Story of Lotus

*There is nothing permanent in this life.
Everything is changing.*

Siddhartha Gautama

The above words are meaningful for Lotus, words that shape and guide her life. Lotus actively practices her Buddhist religion. Now in Canada for 15 years, it remains a vital part of her life, and according to her, in a much different way than when she grew up in her southern Sri Lankan town.

I met Lotus through mutual Asian friends. I was looking for a South Asian woman who practiced Buddhism and felt her spirituality to be an important and guiding influence in her life. My Asian friend responded that she knew “just the person.” I

contacted Lotus by telephone and she readily agreed to be a participant. She said she had recently left her employment as an early child care worker and was concentrating more on her Buddhist practices so involvement in the research seemed timely.

I found Lotus warm yet reserved during our first and only in-person meeting. I was somewhat surprised by this as we had attained an early ease during our phone conversations. With her Western clothing and hairstyle, she seemed as Western as myself. We sat in her living room, her home now quiet as her teen-aged children were busy at school. I was looking forward to our meeting as we had shared common memories of Sri Lanka and meditation practices during our telephone conversation. I was anxious to see how she integrated meditative practices into her daily life. This was something I had yearned to do upon my return from Asia but had yet to figure out how best to include meditation in my busy Western lifestyle. I noticed that beside her couch was a tape recorder with a tape of devotions guided by a Buddhist teacher who also was from Sri Lanka. She said she listened to them often and meditated every morning if possible. Meditation was a priority in her life.

Lotus happily agreed to adopt the pseudonym I had used for her in my research notes prior to our first meeting. “Lotus” is a common symbol in Buddhist practice. Initially the “unaware” person is symbolized by the lotus living beneath the surface of the water. *“Some people are still under the water,”* Lotus shared. *“They haven’t wakened their minds up.”* As spiritual awareness develops, the lotus reaches the surface and full awareness or “being awake” equates with the flower blooming above the water’s surface. I had the impression that Lotus felt the symbolism of the flower mirrored her own

experience. She equated it with her increased awareness of her own Buddhist spiritual practices.

Lotus was eager to share her local Buddhist community. Several months after the interview, during a telephone conversation, Lotus invited me to attend a day long meditation session held at a local retreat centre. I arrived at the session which had attracted both Westerners and Easterners. Lotus welcomed me and I chose a place on the floor which would become my meditation space for the day. Lotus and her husband were obviously highly involved in planning and overseeing the day's events. She had prepared snacks which were available for all the participants. Her husband sat near the Sri Lankan Buddhist teacher and attended to his needs.

Viewing the elderly teacher at the front of the hall, sitting cross-legged as he addressed the room, brought back memories for me. I had encountered many who shared his appearance during my travels in Asia. His shaven head and body draped in robes, resonated with my image of "the Buddhist teacher." It also reminded me of my discomfort with the often unbalanced teacher/student relationship. While I understand that the guru/student Buddhist practice is aimed at facilitating humility, I always find myself struggling with what feels like a rather authoritarian teaching style with little room for equality. I stayed the entire day but had difficulty calming my "monkey mind" as a mind racing with thoughts is referred to in meditation circles. I was glad, however, to be once again in a meditative community, if only for a short time.

There was no cost for the session as a Buddhist precept states "that which is freely received is also freely given." It is customary that Buddhist teachings be given without charge as learning is passed from teachers to students who may become teachers and once

again pass down the teachings. Giving donations is encouraged but not mandatory. I remember struggling with this concept when I was overseas. After completing a 20 day silent meditation course in India, I experienced considerable angst determining what would be a fair contribution (to help offset the travel costs of the teachers). The experience had been both difficult and rewarding for me. Through the teachings and the conducive environment, I was presented with a rare and salient opportunity to engage in self observation and reflection about my place in and in relation to the world. “How does that translate monetarily?” I wondered. I thought of possible opportunities for personal growth in Canada such as course and therapy costs, as this had indeed challenged me to grow personally. I was surprised to learn when handing in my donation following the course that many participants just “never get around to it.” It reminded and saddened me how easily we take for granted those opportunities for learning and self reflection.

A Brief Look at Buddhism

*However hard you search for it, you will never be able to grasp it.
You can only become it.
Buddhist Teaching*

*I do not long for death. I do not long for life.
But I await my time, mindful and attentive.*

(Theragatha, Songs of the Elders, Beyer, 1974, p. 242).

The above words reflect the Buddhist goal of control of the mind to bring ultimate detachment and peace (Barnes, 1987). Buddhism (which has been called the “Light of Asia”) was first preached in northern India in the late 6th and early 5th centuries BCE by Siddhartha Gauthama, the historical Buddha or the “Enlightened One” (Littleton, 1996; Novak, 1996). According to Buddhist scholar Rotem,

Buddhism is much more than a religion; its cultural and philosophical impact has for centuries reverberated throughout south and SouthEast Asia and, more recently, in the West. The tradition has become so vast and diverse that a superficial glance seem to reveal more disparity than continuity. (1996, p. 54)

The Buddha's teaching is outlined in the Four Noble Truths which proclaim *dukkha* and its cessation. *Dukkha* (conventional existence pervaded with suffering,) is the condition of universal impermanence which affects everything. First, humans suffer because they strive for unattainable goals (Barnes, 1987; Gross, 1994). The Second Noble Truth explains that *dukkha* arises from ignorance and from craving. To free the Buddhist practitioner from unhappiness which is caused by ignorance, it is necessary to rid oneself of all attachments to "this is myself; this is mine." The Third Truth asserts that to end *dukkha*, we must eliminate greed, hatred and delusion. One primary delusion is that of permanence. A central teaching of the Buddha was, "there is nothing permanent in this life. Everything is changing." The Fourth Truth tells of the Eightfold Path which presents elements leading to the cessation of *dukkha*: "right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right view and right thought. These eight factors affirm the three essential elements of Buddhist spiritual training -- moral conduct, concentration and wisdom" (Rotem, 1996, p. 75).

Meditation is a primary vehicle for cessation of *dukkha* on the Eightfold path. *Shamatha* meditation aims at achieving calmness and concentration. The goal of the second type of meditation, *vipassana*, is to realize wisdom.

The Buddhist community split early into two primary factions - the Theravada and the Mahayana traditions. The Theravada, which focuses on monasticism, is the dominant form practiced in such places as Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. Lotus was

raised in the Theravadan Buddhist tradition. Classical Theravada teachings assert that there are different goals for different followers. The primary aim, however, remains to attain enlightenment through meditation on the Buddha's teachings and be released from a cycle of rebirths (Rotem, 1996). All forms of Buddhism are motivated by the quest to attain a long-lasting state of contentment through mental, spiritual and moral development (p. 54).

Unlike some religions, Buddhism has spread successfully beyond its Indian roots into diverse cultures. Its message is relatively culture-free and universal, as it does not emphasize a detailed and thus culture-bound code for daily living (Gross, 1994).

A Re-examination of Religious Practices

Lotus was raised in Buddhist traditions in Sri Lanka. She talked of visiting temples and completing rituals such as offering flowers. *"Did you ever have a time when you were feeling that the rituals just weren't doing it for you? Like, there's got to be more...."* I asked, my own biases once again exposed. When Lotus responded, I wondered and worried that I had influenced her answer.

Every time when I was offering flowers...doing some ritual, I always thought, "There must be something more than this." I think that I had somewhere in the corner of my mind that this is not real Buddhism that I am practicing.

As a small child, she equated meditation with monks living in remote jungle monasteries. Yet, her mother, an English teacher, also meditated every morning. *"She was always telling us about the loving kindness meditation,"* Lotus recalled. *"Because of my meditation, you are doing well,"* her mother would tell her and Lotus and her siblings would laugh. *"Because, it didn't mean anything to me,"* Lotus explained. *"But now, I understand why she said those things."*

Lotus had always actively practiced Buddhism in her native Sri Lanka but it was not until she came to Canada that she began to study her religion. As I adjusted my audio-tape recorder and leaned back on her couch with interest, she began to tell her story:

Actually in Canada, we don't have anybody else. Just ourselves. Me, my husband and our two children. All our roots are back home. And that separation was really hard on me, even now. So, I was so upset for a long time....We were having a hard time; I still remember. We lost our family members, my mother, his mother, my grandmother. We couldn't attend to any of those things.

"You couldn't attend to the funerals?" I asked.

"No, nothing," Lotus continued.

We were not financially okay because he was a student and I wasn't working. I was home with two kids. Those things bothered me a lot. When I think about the parents, the brothers and sisters....I think any religion is promoting people to help their families. But I couldn't do any of those things. So I was always regretting, being away from them. Then I thought, I should find a way...there must be something...Buddha must have said something about these things....So things like that triggered me to think about how I can I live a happy life here. And I thought, I should improve my spiritual life, not only this material life, and see whether there is an answer for my question. Then I started reading about Buddhism...That's what triggered for me to learn about Buddhism a bit more deeper.

"So until that point, did you have a sense that it was just ritual or it was just...?"

I began, surfacing my own biases once again. "Yeah. Something like that," Lotus concurred.

I wasn't practicing Buddhism; I can tell you the truth. I was a Buddhist thinking the rituals are Buddhism. But it is not. I understand that now. Being born as a Buddhist, I didn't know much. All the rituals were Buddhism to me when I was small. Like I thought, we were born in a Buddhist family to worship Buddha, go to the temple....When I came over here only, I started reading about Buddhism and learning about Buddhism.

I asked if she had read books about Buddhism when she still lived in Sri Lanka.

No, we didn't have that many books to read. And nobody, nobody was aware...I know they did their best but nobody was aware....Even now they think, it's a

concentration meditation and...that we [just] have to live according to those...rules and regulations.

"Who thinks that?" I wondered aloud.

Normally people think that way back home....But when you read and when you have a deeper understanding of Buddhism, they are not rules and regulations made for you. For sure, it is not reward and punishment. If you don't do this, this thing will happen to you. But it is a philosophy, a way of life....If somebody can live according to that, somebody can have a good life in this life. And if you believe in rebirth-- that I don't trust much-- you will have a good life after death too.

I was curious about Lotus' view of the terms *spirituality* and *religion*. It was apparent that the terms were confusing to her. *"What does the word 'spirituality' mean to you?" I asked.*

"Spirituality means to me actually ...how can I say that? It's a meaningful life living according to a religious prospect," Lotus replied.

"According to a religious prospect...Prospect being doctrine or rules and regulations or ...?" I asked searching for clarity.

"Doctrines," she replied.

"So...spirituality and religion...are these words related to you?" I asked .

"I think they are related to me....

"Are they the same thing?" I queried.

"Spirituality and religion. That is how I see it as a Buddhist....Buddhism actually is ...I can't say it's a religion. It is a way of life to me...It's a philosophy like. So I see it's the same as...spirituality means religion to me - something like that."

I wanted to learn more about her meditation practices. *"Meditation is not something for you to sit down and just do," Lotus told me. "It is a way of life....I do*

concentration meditation (vipassana) and tranquillity meditation (samadha.)” Since her husband began working out of the province for extended periods of time, Lotus found a regular time each morning to practice her meditation, just after her children leave for school. She listens to tapes of a Buddhist priest who actually visits Edmonton two or three times a year. *“I put a tape on because I want to start with calmness, without my jiggling mind,”* she told me.

I listen to the tape for at least half an hour and ...then right away I start concentrating on my breathing. And if the phone doesn't ring, I go about 45 minutes to one hour....Actually, I normally don't see how much time I was sitting.

During our conversation, the telephone rang several times. As I found it distracting during our interview, I was sure that it would interfere with her meditation. *“Do you not unplug your phone?”* I asked.

“I can't do it,” she told me. *“If I unhook it, I know it will be good for me but I think I am being selfish again.”* Most of her friends and her husband avoid calling her in the morning in order to give her some private time.

In addition to meditating on her own, she meets monthly with a local Buddhist group whose members mostly originate from Sri Lanka and Thailand, but also have Westerners in their realm. There, they offer flowers and incense and then listen to similar tapes of a talk given by a priest.

Lotus credits her Buddhist practices with helping her live a calmer life. They shape how she perceives and reacts to difficult situations and relationships. When she was living a stressful work situation, she actively practiced loving kindness meditations to help her cope with angry feelings. *“Anybody can improve their hatred and anger and those things in their mind,”* she told me. It helped her affirm and accept herself and by

leaving her position, make a choice that supported herself. Lotus was able to cope with her husband losing his job and adjusted to him being away for long periods by focusing on the Buddhist teaching that *“all is impermanent.”* *“I handled it very well because of spirituality,”* she shared. Lotus also credits her Buddhist beliefs with supporting and enhancing her marriage. When they have disagreements inevitable in any relationship, she looks at herself first. *“You don’t have to be angry,”* she told me. *“You can’t change others for sure....You can’t change anybody but yourself.”*

I was curious whether her evaluation of her own Buddhist practices had helped her learn about herself. *“It is different now,”* she began. *“The way of thinking is different now than the way of thinking in those days.”*

“Your way of thinking has changed ever since you started to look past the ritual?” I asked.

“Those days, actually I thought, I am born here, I have a husband and children. I have materials. I will enjoy and buy whatever and I’ll do this thing and that thing to make me happy.” She responded *“Then after studying and when I improved my spiritual life, I see those things are not the real happiness in life.”*

Reflections on Lotus’ Story

I admired Lotus’ willingness to struggle to find a place for her spiritual practices while living a Western lifestyle. I learned that Lotus was eager to spend time with her husband when he was in the city. When I asked her if she meditates when he is at home, she said:

He always says okay. [But] I have learned, I have to be happy with him too. I have to agree with some things that he wants me to do. I am not a monk or a priest. No, I have to live happily in this life too.

Her unwillingness to unplug the telephone while meditating demonstrated her struggle between honoring and nurturing both her own spiritual development and her family commitments. What was clear, however, throughout her story was that her Buddhist philosophy and practices are supportive and sustaining for her. They are the filters through which she perceives, reacts to and understands the world.

The Story of Ridha: Redefining her Cultural Space

*Save us, our compassionate Lord,
from our folly, by your wisdom,
from our arrogance, by your forgiving love,
from our greed, by your infinite bounty,
and from our insecurity, by your healing power.*

Muslim prayer

I first met Ridha at a literature conference for South Asian Women. I had learned of the conference from a friend who knew that I was looking for participants for my research and thought I might meet interested persons at that gathering. I arrived at the meeting to find that I was one of the few Caucasians in the room. Feeling more than a bit conspicuous dressed in Western clothing as opposed to the Punjabi suits or saris that most of the women were wearing, I joined the group who were listening to a renowned East Indian poet now living in Canada. During a break in the session, I announced that I was completing a master's degree in Adult Education and was interested in studying the spirituality of South Asian women and its impact on their learning. I explained that I was looking for women who viewed their own spirituality and spiritual practices to be important, meaningful forces in their lives.

Following the session, Ridha was one of the several women who approached me. One of the younger women attending the session, she was wearing a Punjabi suit typical of her native Pakistan and her short stylish haircut spoke of the Western influences in her life which were to become more apparent as we spoke. I learned that she was Muslim, and felt spirituality to be central in her life. We exchanged phone numbers and I agreed to call her at a later time.

Ridha and I soon became friends. We shared the common experience of being graduate students and I enjoyed her intensity, keen wit and willingness to explore and try to make sense of her place in the world, a search which mirrored many of my own questions. She was also keen to introduce me to the local Muslim culture of which she was an active participant.

My Introduction to Muslim Cultures

I had already had some experiences of Moslem cultures. My first real encounter was during a two week stay in Egypt over ten years ago. Thinking back, I realize that I was rather culturally unaware and remember wearing shorts, albeit long ones, in an attempt to cope with the 50+ C temperatures. While by Western standards I was well-clad, my apparel was in sharp contrast to the floor length black dresses and long face masking head pieces that the local Muslim women wore. I was perplexed how, dressed like that, the women could suffer the heat. At any rate, I attracted a vast amount of unwanted attention. I rather felt like an object and my personal space was regularly violated through uninvited advances by local men. I remember being none too sorry to be leaving after my two week stay as the insistent attention was overwhelming and tiresome.

Since that time, I have traveled to other countries where the predominant culture is Muslim. I learned that “Muslim” seems to translate quite differently from place to place. In Rajasthan, India, I found myself again in an awkward situation while attending a Muslim festival. Accompanied by other Western women, we were suddenly surrounded by a circle of what seemed like endless Muslim men. I noticed that few local women had attended the festivities, which may have been the reason for our popularity. We were escorted from the festival by a law enforcement officer who assured us that “that would be best.” In Indonesia, I experienced little of the leering and second class treatment that I had known in Egypt. Yet, what remained glaring to me, was the subordinate position that women, and in particular Muslim women, seemed to occupy in Muslim cultures. Perhaps the Muslim women in Bali were not dressed in head to toe coverings, but watching them carry the heavy oxygen tanks used for tourist scuba diving excursions while the men relaxed reminded me that theirs was not a position I envied.

Local Muslim Events

Ridha invited me to attend a local mosque during Mahoram, an important festival time for Muslims. This particular occasion honored and recounted the death of an historical figure revered by the Shiite sect. I stayed close by her side as we entered the ornately adorned mosque. The women and children sat on one side while the men sat on the other side of the ceiling high partition. When I asked about this custom, I was told this was done partly in order that the children not bother the men. Yet, this did allow for a sense of community amongst the women. As I sat next to Ridha, I felt welcomed by the curious faces that smiled in our direction. There was a male speaker who spoke directly to the men while we viewed the lecturer on television by way of a video recorder. He

spoke passionately, and with more emotion than I was comfortable. He preached that “being a believer means you are an above average human being,” challenged the listeners to grow to their fullest potential and talked of “Allah testing their nature.” I remember thinking that message seemed to border on the simplistic, replete with “good versus bad” messages and wondered what Ridha was thinking.

Following the sermon, there was a procession through the temple. A symbolic re-enactment of the death of their holy figure, it provided an opportunity for public participation. I was quite taken aback by what ensued. Emotion filled the room as many of the women started beating their hearts and crying. Ridha said it was because the people still felt the pain so deeply, even though the deaths occurred many centuries ago. Maybe, Ridha added, it helps them see that their troubles are minor compared to others and perhaps it served as an opportunity to also release their current life troubles.

Ridha seemed to appreciate my interest in her activities as she also invited me to attend the celebration marking the 50th anniversary of Pakistan’s independence. We arrived late and were escorted into a hall with not a free chair in sight. Once again, I was one of the few Caucasians at the gathering. Several women scurried to find us seats in one of the front rows which were occupied in part by local politicians who had been invited to speak. Ridha whispered to me, chuckling to herself, “*they think you are one of the dignitaries.*” The speeches seemed to be lengthy, which is typically my perception when I sit in a hot, crowded room for too long a time. Following the ceremony, there was a feast, which I was learning was typical of Ridha’s events. She was approached by many in the crowd and was obviously well-known and popular with both the older and younger people in attendance.

By the time Ridha and I began our two formal interviews, through our excursions to Muslims events and chats over tea, we had already achieved a marked familiarity. We sat on the floor in her room for our first and subsequent interviews. At the beginning of the first interview, she chose Ridha as her pseudonym, a name she had always liked. With honesty and humor, Ridha began to tell her story.

Reflections on the Interview Process

I remember sitting transfixed and perhaps a bit frustrated during the initial interview as Ridha told of her experiences. Hers was a story echoing themes similar to those found in historical familial novels. Stories full of struggle, unrealized love and painful life decisions seemingly imposed on people who did not deserve them. I remember listening anxiously as she recounted her experiences and struggles living within the Shiite tradition having fallen in love with Imran, a man of Sunni background. As transfixed as I was by her narrative, I remember thinking, “*What does this have to do with spirituality and learning?*” the focus of my questions that had initiated the initial interview.

I began the second formal interview “armed” with specific questions that would relate more directly, I hoped, to my research questions. Upon re-reading the transcripts during which she jumped from childhood memories to current familial events, I realized that neatly “excising the essence” of her spirituality was not only impossible for myself, a new researcher relatively naïve to Islamic traditions and values, but perhaps not even desirable. Her sense of her religion and spiritual being were enmeshed in her family and cultural background and could not be articulated in declaratives that dropped neatly into the designated spaces shaped by the questions on my interview page.

A Family's History

Ridha has lived in Canada for four years. She comes from a relatively wealthy extended family of eight siblings and has lived most of her life in the Punjab province of Pakistan. She recounted that her father, originally from India, had married four times. In response to my surprise, Ridha clarified that in Islam, a man can marry four women at the same time. *"This was not the case with my father,"* she assured me.

Her father had studied at a university in India. From a wealthy family, he did not want to get married initially so his family *"made him get married,"* Ridha related. After one year, his first wife and their baby died in childbirth. It was not long after, that his mother insisted that he marry again. With his second wife, he had three children, two girls and a boy. His second wife died while giving birth to the son. Ridha explained that death during childbirth in India was actually not uncommon in the 1940s.

"And did your brother live?" I interjected in an attempt to follow her story.

"Yeah, he lived," Ridha continued. Ridha's father was once again single, but now with three children. His family again insisted that he remarry. *"So, then again he got married,"* Ridha said while laughing, apparently reacting to the surprised expression on my face.

One year later, his third wife died giving birth to another son who also survived. *"It seems really unbelievable or unrealistic,"* Ridha added and I concurred. Her father then migrated to Pakistan with his four children. Ridha reminded me of the history of the independence of Pakistan and India and the migration of people. There were riots between Urdu and Punjabi speaking people. Many Sikhs and Hindus who were living in the Punjab province in Pakistan migrated to India and the Muslims migrated to Pakistan.

Ridha finished her father's story. *"So when there was a migration, my father (who spoke Urdu) came to Lahore and settled there. And finally, after five years, he got married to my mother. So, with my mother, she's alive, he had four kids."* In her typical good humour, Ridha finished her rather convoluted story. *"So altogether, we are eight,"* she said while laughing. I remember being overwhelmed trying to follow her family's history. *"It's a good thing I'm sitting down, (I said with a smile). It makes me tired."*

Ridha's final comments were most remarkable. *"So with one mother we have three, and with other one; we are four. Altogether we are eight. But, Jody, you won't believe that until maybe, I was in college, I didn't know that we were from different mothers."* Ridha told of growing up in a "very happy family" and she credits her family's closeness to her mother's sense of equality and her unfailing faith.

A Brief Introduction to the Islamic Faith

*Learn to know thyself.
Who knows himself, knows his Lord.*

(Hadith, Islamic sacred text)

During our first interview, Ridha stated that, *"my religion is Islam and I am Muslim,"* thus clearing up my early confusions about the semantics central to her faith. The word *Islam*, derives from the same Semetic root as the Hebrew word *shalom* (which translates as "peace"). *Islam* means "entering into a condition of peace and security with God through allegiance or surrender to him" (Bowker, 1997, p. 479).

Muslims are monotheistic and believe that a omnipotent, just and merciful god is the creator of the universe. Islam, however:

...does not think of itself as a 'religion' if by that word we mean a set of beliefs and actions sealed off from the rest of our worldly business. Rather, Islam sees

itself as an all-embracing way of life. Contained within its teaching of the path to God is guidance for the entire range of human life -- social, political, and economic. (Novak, 1996, p. 282)

The considerable influence of the Islamic faith in Pakistan is echoed in Ridha's statement that *"Pakistan is one of the few countries founded on the basis of religion."* According to Islamic culture, *"you don't have two separate laws."* Ridha discussed our tendency in Canada to separate religious laws from country laws. This is not done in Pakistan as the Islamic religion gives you *"the whole way of spending your life."*

According to Ridha, there are approximately 72 different Muslims sects with Sunni and Shi'a being the most prominent. The Shiite practice is more ecstatic, while the Sunni is reserved and simple. The Shiite affirm human free will while the Sunni are more deterministic. Ridha's family who followed the Shi'a tradition were, according to her, neither orthodox, nor liberal.

My mother seems to be a very religious lady...she's attending different ceremonies....she is always attending church and all that stuff... She takes everything according to religion sort of a thing. Right? ... I think she's a perfect human being that also inspired me. Because she is taking all the stuff and she really wants to figure out according to that and that's not bad....And though in a way, it seems to me that my father wasn't that much religious.....So, you can say - mediocre sort of people....Whatever religious practices are, we do to some extent.

Islam is the youngest and the fastest growing of the world's religions. Islam has now approximately a billion followers and is found in most countries of the world (Bowker, 1997). "Because of the relative simplicity of its requirements, its diffusion has been like that of water spreading over the ground, taking on the colour of the earth it flows over" (Bowker, 1997, p. 480). The Islamic faith is found in many different styles which share similar basic premises including two central affirmations. The first is, "There is no god but Allah" and the second, "Muhammed is the Prophet of God."

The revelations that Muhammed received over a relatively short time span of 23 years is the Koran (or Qur'an) which is the holy book of Islam. God revealed the Koran to Muhammed to guide humans to the truth. "For Muslims, there is nothing holier on earth. The Koran is for them, like Christ for Christians, the living Word of God, God's presence on earth" (Novak, 1996, p. 281). The other sacred text of the Muslims is the *Hadith* which are reports of the sayings, deeds and silences of the prophet Muhammed (Bowker, 1997).

In Islamic societies, women have long endured inequitable status. While Islamic feminists do not see the Koran as unproblematic, it is recognized that the Koran improved the situation of women in the ancient Arabian world. Female infanticide was outlawed, protections including divorce rights were sanctioned, and women were given inheritance rights for the first time.

Muslim thinkers, and especially feminists...have found [the Koran] often to be at odds with the frankly male chauvinistic institutions and customs of Islamic societies since early times. The Koran explicitly asserts that men and women are equal before God and enjoy the same religious duties and privileges. (Novak, 1996, p.302)

One primary characteristic of the Islamic faith was a great reverence for knowledge. According to the *Hadith*, "the acquisition of knowledge is a duty incumbent upon every Muslim, male and female" (Novak, 1996, p. 320). While Muslims achieved much in philosophy and natural sciences, a reaction to the achievements has been a growing suspicion that perhaps the achievements of the human mind were taking priority over the revelation of God. Thus, the prevailing tendency has been one of giving priority to obedience. Another reaction has been a reinforcement of the Sufi tradition of seeking a close, direct and personal experience of God (Bowker, 1997).

*There is a force within that gives you life—
 Seek that.
 In your body there lies a priceless jewel—
 Seek that.
 Oh, wandering Sufi,
 if you are in search of the greatest treasure,
 don't look outside,
 Look within, and seek That.*

(Novak, 1996, p.328).

A Muslim Woman's Story

Ridha's story is not typical of Pakistani Muslim women by her own accounts. She has graduate level education from Pakistan, the seventh child of eight in the family and the only sister of four to have university training and to have remained single. This is remarkable for, in her culture, women of Ridha's age (mid-30s) have typically long since married, had children and "settled down" according to Ridha. While her sisters were married by age 20, she was encouraged by her elder brother to pursue her studies. Ridha recounted that:

I was in my high school ...and when I finished that, my brother said "I also want you to study. Now, if she wants to study, we're not going to get her married." Because, over there, it's just arranged marriages. You don't have to look. So, I was doing my studies...In a way, maybe, my brother helped me a lot. That's why it doesn't seem to me at any point that I am going through any [discrimination], that I was a victim or something like that.

Ridha's family in Pakistan was involved in real estate. Her eldest brother often consulted her regarding business matters which, I got the impression, was not an experience shared by her sisters. As her father had died 18 years previously, her eldest brother acted as the head of the family. Not only was Ridha encouraged to pursue her studies, but when she began her professional career as a graphic designer, she was not limited in socializing with men.

I studied in Lahore, in Punjab to do my training. I was really very excited because in Pakistan to do graduate training is really something for a woman..... And after I finished my education, he helped me to set up a business and he never put on any restriction to meet guys. You know, over there, it's not appreciated if you meet guys and boys. But he showed full confidence in a way that I can do whatever I want to do because maybe he might have seen that it depends on person to person character also. And then, I got a job right away in a four-star hotel. I met so many men and all that and everybody used to think, I am really a very wise lady. My brother also used to think I am really very wise. He used to talk with me about business and doing this and that. It's not like we have seen Asian women taken in that context. Usually, they are just housewife. I never cooked in my life up 'till I came over here!

Perhaps the relatively independent lifestyle that she experienced in Pakistan and the support and encouragement she had previously received from her brother made the following events even more difficult to fathom and understand.

Ridha began teaching at a local university and met Imran, a friend of her younger brother who, like him, was a medical student. At the time, she was 27 years old which in her own words was “*really quite a big age not to get married.*” Ridha told me that while marriages are arranged in Pakistan, “*it's not like nobody goes out with guys and nobody is having affairs. I think this is something, no matter if it's 18th century or 17th century, nobody can stop that. They have a lot of restriction but I think it's more exciting when there is restriction,*” she said while laughing. Ridha tried to convince Imran that as “love marriages” and selecting a man for herself were not practiced in her family, they should not even entertain the possibility. Her brother and mother had also set a very high standard for her. Ridha told me that:

Whatever proposal come, they refuse. He's no good for this or that reason. Maybe they were thinking that they really wanted some PhD person. It took a long time for me to accept that Imran was interested in me. I said, “no, no, no,” and he said, “yes, yes.”

They knew that it would be difficult as Imran, while a respectable medical student, was from a Sunni family. Imran got a scholarship to study for a Master's in Public Health program in the United States. Ridha remarked that, "*we knew that it would be really hard. So, he thought that, if he went outside Pakistan, it may be easier to get married and live outside rather than to be in the family and to face all that.*" Ridha spoke with her brother regarding Imran's proposal. His response was for her not to even entertain the possibility. "*The family is low, low standard and low caste,*" he replied. "*And they are Sunni; it won't work.*"

Ridha told him that she was the one "*taking the challenge, whatever the consequences.*" Ridha trusted that she and her brother had a close relationship and that he respected her opinion and ability to reason. It was quite a shock when the next day Imran's brother brought a proposal, and Ridha's brother quickly replied, "*she's already engaged.*"

"*At that time, everything seems to me like shattered down,*" Ridha recounted. "*I cared for everybody...I cared for their feelings...I cared for religious stuff....*" Until that time, no one was aware that she and Imran really cared for each other or that "*there was any affair because we were playing secretly sort of a thing.*" Ridha asked that her sister plead on her behalf but to no avail. Meanwhile, other suitors sent proposals which Ridha refused outright. After several months of refusing proposals, Ridha met with her aunt during a large family gathering.

And in the morning, when I was going to my job, my aunt -- we respect like a mother,-- said, "You know, in our culture, girls don't talk on these matters and I think whatever your brother and mother are doing and saying, they are right." And we are taught to respect elders so much that we don't say anything. So I kept quiet and she said, "She is ready. She is saying she doesn't say no." Everybody

can see that I am not happy...But I didn't find enough courage. It was a family affair, such a big family affair and I should come up with "no" really needs a lot of courage; you have to prepare for the consequences also. So, I kept quiet and got engaged [to a Shiite medical student] the next day. And they came from that city and my brother arranged for 100 people dinner and all that within a day or so.

It was after the engagement that Ridha reports "crossing a line." In her words, *"I could have gone very...what you say?...Rebellion?"*

"Rebellious?" I added, eager to supply the correct word and have the story continue.

I took the other way. I started thinking, if I really have faith in my belief, in my spirituality, something will help me out. So, instead of being rebellious or saying anything, I was quite like a dead body. I'd gone to that extreme also because at one point I thought, this happens with our women all the time in our country. You get married and you have to leave your affairs and all that so I was like 40/50% prepared for that. Okay, I'll take it. I should take it as it is.

Ridha not only experienced pressure from her family but also from Imran. He telephoned and wrote daily from the United States. According to Ridha, *"he gone crazy...He cried and cried for one hour on telephone and said, 'No way. You should not take this. I'll die. I'll commit suicide.'"* Imran's reaction significantly affected Ridha.

She believed that it was not fair that she get married to someone else when *"he is taking it so seriously."*

At that time...I don't know.... I was so confused. I have to sort it out whether it's really tradition or it's your religious belief that makes you do what you do. It was something, maybe traditional, cultural that instead of being rebellious, I said "Okay. I think I should be...." We are taught [to believe] in this sort of God. Yes, this is a test from God and you have to pass it. So, I also took it like that. For one year, I read that holy book all the time.

“*The Koran?*” I asked. I was confused as I thought that it was written in Arabic. I learned later that her Koran was written both in Arabic and Urdu, and that the languages are closely related.

Yeah, reading all religious stuff...going through it and going through it. I used to go to job, come back, do my prayer and take the book and sit and then eat and sleep. No talking. That's what I'm strong from. It didn't help me from my practical life but it gave me...insight. I never thought...that there is a dark tunnel; there is no way.

Ridha realized that the more she focused on her faith, the more she believed that god would support her. “*This book is a miracle,*” she told me. “*It says that there is a supreme power and he's always near to everybody. He will never leave people who need help.*” Ridha struggled to make sense of her experience.

I think it's not with every person. There are [only] few persons who have to go through all this and there must be some meaning....How come he [god] is just giving different stuff for different people?....Why not my sister go through all this? Why not my friend go through all this? There must be some meaning to it or something that I am going through with that specific sort of torture or suffering. After a year, my family thought, the way she is, if she says she will be not happy, what if we get her married there and she gets divorced and comes back? So, finally my mother took my side. 'That's okay. Whatever happens, say no to them.'

Ridha's quest was one of determining “*what gives me this strength?*” Why was she able to remain personally strong while Imran was “*going bonkers in the States?*” She spoke of other people, who, during minor life crises became scattered and rebellious. “*What is keeping me in this shape?*” she asked. Ridha decided that “*it may be something I have to experience. It's something for my learning. It's something to come up with being a better human being.*”

Ridha left her professional position in Pakistan and moved to Canada, in part, to be closer to Imran. She has made several visits to see him (without her mother's

knowledge,) and when we met, spoke nightly with him on the telephone. Ridha and Imran have since stopped contact. Coupled with new disappointments, Imran remains confused and depressed some ten years after the upset in Pakistan, and is unable to make a commitment.

“What Gives me this Strength?”

When Ridha reflected on the source of her strength, she realized that it stemmed from the strong religious base she received in her childhood.

Yes, it is driving me in a positive way. Otherwise, I may end up like Imran. The character building stuff, and the strongness and the faith I feel; it's not going to betray you. I think, in childhood, if you really get a strong base, maybe in your belief...maybe in your living....Your character is built at that time and that makes you take all the different sort of suffering or pain....

Ridha attributed much her strong faith to her mother. Her mother modeled honesty and virtue as well as strong religious convictions. “*Maybe deep down in my roots, whatever my mother has, maybe it's in my genes also,*” Ridha wondered aloud.

It was clear to me that Ridha had reflected much on why she held onto Muslim traditions.

If you really reason out and it makes sense to you, then why not to follow it.. ..You must have seen a lot of Muslim women...I'm not a true Muslim in that way; I'm not following all the rules. Though I have taken some of religious stuff and it's in myself in a way that it covers all my life. It's not that I have to wear a scarf to be Muslim or I have to prayI have belief in religion to some extent, but it is not that powerful...

As Ridha continued to reflect on her faith, she outlined distinctions between her views of religion and spirituality.

Religion is there...you practice that... you go to church...I think like religion gives you some laws and some rules to go on your life. And if I have to obey Canadian law, then why can't I obey Islamic law which...will always lead you to some goodness. It won't lead you to any destructive way. So, I take religion to the

extent that it's there to lead a good life....It has some values; it has a lot of good teaching and it also gives words to purify yourself, to purify your soul or something like that...[But],it won't give you satisfaction for your inner self. Religion is you have to spend your life according to these rules....And there are some historical facts...people having this belief and this happened and you have to believe that also. But why it takes roots in me? That's my spirituality.

"In your roots?" I asked a bit perplexed. *"What do you mean, in my roots?"*

"My inner self, you can say. My roots means my own inner self."

Ridha likened the growth of her spirituality to progression in school. Religion is what is learned in the early grades while spirituality which is based on formal religious beliefs is "tenth grade" level.

Spirituality took base from there... My spirituality is more powerful .When you go inside yourself and you see there is something more. It's not concerned with the world; it's more concerned with your own self.... For me, it [spirituality] means something you believe very deeply in yourself which is not something to do with the environment or with other people. It's something you are going through yourself.

While Ridha recognized that it is her spirituality that gives her strength, she also highlighted the past and continued importance of rituals which she equates with religious celebrations.

I'm from Shiite sect and we have every year... religious ceremonies....It's a big impact on every person if he takes really seriously. Because it's not something like you are imposed. It's like a social gathering also so we don't take it like you have to go to church and sit down silently there...It's a sort of socialization; it's sort of function ; it's sort of tradition...it's sort of rituals - that's why I'm saying it's really hard then to separate religion and rituals apart.

Reflections on Ridha's Story

Throughout my conversations with Ridha, the theme of interpreting the world through her formal Islamic beliefs as her way of defining and sustaining her own personal

spirituality surfaced many times. When I asked Ridha if there was a time in her life when she noticed a shift to spirituality, she said:

You can say a turning point ...in my life...was something to do with my belief and just to see myself, where I stand, and how strong I am from inside. How I take worldly events which are coming to me from the environment...And how I ask if "Does it clash with my beliefs which I have set for my life?"I find those beliefs and those rules are...I think that I feel strong about them and I feel confident with that.

I was confused and inwardly frustrated that Ridha had not openly rebelled against what considered blatant injustice while she was living in Pakistan. She also marveled at her lack of open rebellion and it was through that experience, however, that she learned of her inner strength. Ridha continues to rely on that inner power particularly in times of difficulty. As that strength flows from her cultural upbringing and learnings, it is no wonder that she chooses to reside and remain rooted in her Muslim culture.

CHAPTER 5: SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

Themes are...like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus experienced as meaningful wholes. Themes are the stars that make up the universe of meaning we live through. It is by the light of these themes that we can navigate and explore such universes.

(van Manen, 1984, p. 59).

A deeper understanding of the participants' experiences is found in the themes that underlie and pervade their stories for these themes shape their learning and perceptions, and influence how they come to know the world.

A Word of Caution

As I reread the women's stories and my impressions of them, I am reminded of Sita's words of caution: "*In India, there is no generalizing.*" Certainly, her advice can be extended to all the participants in the study and their respective cultures. It is important to remember that all five of the participants are not typical of women from their respective cultures and countries. The very fact that they live here in Canada places them in a select group. All of the participants have also received considerable formal schooling which is not common to many South Asian women. This has given them exposure to different ideas and ways of viewing the world which may have influenced their views of religion, spirituality and learning. I have tried to pay heed to the words of the educational philosopher, Maxine Greene, who reminds us that we need "to allow for the distinctiveness of human beings" (Personal Communication, April 15, 1998). It is also essential to remember that these themes arose out of relatively short acquaintances of two to six months. What the women presented to me in their stories, and through me in this thesis is but a fraction of who they are. As such, the stories are incomplete.

Further, surfacing the themes was not a clear-cut and smooth process. The stories were convoluted, often jumping backwards and forwards in time and centered in cultures that I had experienced but could not fully appreciate. While I have a fondness for their countries of origin, my ability to understand and provide justice to and insights on their stories is limited by our lack of shared histories and cultures. I struggled to ensure that what I had discovered as a theme was, in fact, supported by the data and not simply one of my assumptions that I wanted realized. The themes changed and shifted through the course of the writing as I read and re-read the transcripts and tried to differentiate themes from experiences. Part of this shifting was due to the interdependence of religion, culture and spirituality evident in their stories. In the end, I have decided to discuss the integration of culture and religion as a context to the themes.

The Interplay of Religion and Culture

The primacy of formal religions in their South Asian cultures was echoed by all the participants. Their religions, in fact, played pivotal roles in their respective cultures. It was clear early on in the interviews that it was not possible to separate religion from culture as the two are intertwined and interdependent. “*Culture is much more than tradition and convention, rights and rituals,*” Sita instructed. It is “*something which holds us together.*” Not only does culture involve language and social practices, but it includes spiritual practices and influences one’s world view. It was evident for the participants, their cultures shape how they view religion and spirituality and how they see themselves in relationships and in relation to the world.

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Hindu does is more important than what a Hindu believes” (Flood, 1996, p. 12). Similar cultural expectations are found in the Islamic religious writing.

The Struggle with Semantics

Common also to the participants was confusion regarding semantics that were central to this study. The women did not share a common understanding of the terms *spirituality* and *religion*. The ingrained cultural roots of their religions may help explain the lack of clarity regarding the words, but as well, English was the women’s second or third language and the word *spirituality* did not have an equivalent in many of their native languages.

Van Manen (1984) discusses the difficulty of using words to refer to phenomena that have lost some of their original meaning. I worried this might be true of *spirituality* which in the West has become somewhat of a “catch all” category referring to various religious experiences that are not tied to formal religious institutions (Hague, 1995).

Maya’s uncertainty regarding the meanings of the terms surfaced early in the first interview. As she asked, “*First of all,...I want to clear...Spirituality, is it something related to the religion or is it different from that?*” It was apparent that the words I was using in my questions were problematic. Maya’s question stemmed in part from the fact that *spirituality* is a term not used in Nepal. Neither does an equivalent word exist in Newari, Maya’s mother tongue nor in Nepali, her second language. As she struggled to define a term relatively new to her, she decided that spirituality appeared to relate to helping people which may be separate from religion.

While Maya found the terms confusing, Lotus did not draw distinctions between *spirituality* and *religion*.

Spirituality and religion...This how I see it as a Buddhist... Buddhism actually...I can't say it's a religion. It is a way of life to me...It's a philosophy like. So I see it's the same. Spirituality means religion to me...something like that.

Sita and Taja, the remaining Hindu participants, and Ridha, the Muslim participant, shared the view that the meaning of the word *spirituality* is markedly different that of *religion*.

Religion: Rooted in Ritual

Although the participants differed in their meanings of spirituality and religion, it was interesting that the participants shared a common understanding of what religion itself entailed. Religion was rooted in and inseparable from ritual practices which were taught in childhood often through familial traditions. Taja spoke **fondly** of her weekly family tradition of making flower garlands under the direction of her grandfather in order to adorn the religious pictures. *"It gave us immense joy because it was a collective family thing that we did together."* Sita recalled that her father and grandmothers strictly observed the religious laws and devoted time to reading scriptures, meditating and praying. Her fondest childhood memory is of waking early each morning to the sound of her father's chanting.

Not only was religion inseparable from rituals, it was also intertwined with and characterized by traditions and festivals and community events. Ridha's words illustrate the complexity.

I'm from the Shiite sect and we have every year... religious ceremonies....It's a big impact on every person if he takes really seriously because it's not something imposed. It's a social gathering also. We don't take it like you have to go to

church and sit down silently there...It's sort of socialization; it's sort of a function; it's sort of tradition...it's sort of rituals...That's why I'm saying it's really hard, then, to separate religion and rituals apart.

According to Joseph Campbell, an expert on religious and mythical practices, “ritual introduces you to the meaning of what’s going on” (in Vardey, 1996, p. 212). When I probed less than subtly for the meanings inherent in or behind the rituals, I found that while many of the participants recognized that the rituals had cultural roots and meanings, they did not know them personally. In fact, many of the rituals from the Hindu tradition stem from Sanskrit teachings which are commonly understood only by priests and Brahmins.

Personal interpretation and understanding, however, did not seem crucial to the women. What was important to many of the women was that the act of performing rituals linked them to their culture and communities. Most of the participants had learned the rituals as children and had been performing them for many years before moving to Canada. Maya continues to perform *pujaa* each morning and evening while living here. She completes religious practices to follow *dharma* which teach that performing *pujaa* is a cultural requirement. For Maya, completing these rituals defines and affirms herself as a Nepali woman. It is from being a Nepali woman that she derives her own sense of self. When I asked her why and for how long she will continue to do her *pujaa* each morning and evening, she responded, “*being Hindu, being Nepali woman. I will do that as long as I can move my two hands...because I am Nepali woman and I want to continue that culture....I have done for many years. I cannot stop.*”

Religion: A Community Experience

Religious events, where rituals were performed, were generally communal in nature and also served an important social function. This was apparent in all the women's stories. As responsibility for religious ceremonies often fell on the women in their respective countries, the rituals were usually performed by communities of women. The theme of rituals providing a sense of community is also found in Western literature as shared by Vardey (1996).

It is my feeling that all humans mark their paths on trees, mark time with ceremony. That repetition and orderliness make for ritual. Etymologically, *rite* is from *ritual*, as is *arithmetic*. We want sums, constants. Rhythm is from the same root. Ritual is a collective experience, repeated and sanctified. We perform it to remind ourselves and one another that we are not alone, that we sing in chorus....(p. 216)

All the participants expressed their willingness if not eagerness to take part in the rituals of their respective communities. While most reported their participation as expected, they also were clear that it was their choice to participate. Sita spoke of worshipping with a community of women in her village where she took an oath to fast and pray for 12 years.

When I was about eight years old, like most girls, I was asked to keep fast on certain religious festivity days. I took the vow because most girls at that age have two aims, to have a loving husband and children who will make you proud.Nobody pressured me, I was eager to belong. I was doing it because this is how things are done and I was eager to conform to religious traditions....I must tell you, neither I resented it because our religion is very much into celebration and most of the time, it ends always in a big get together and eating together.

It was clear in the participants' narratives that both their cultural traditions rooted in religion and their spiritual practices, whether or not named as such, were influential and sustaining in the participants' lives. Both their community-focused religious traditions and their more personal spiritual practices were crucial in shaping and

supporting their views of themselves and of the world. Rather than existing independently, their culturally-based religious traditions and spiritual practices were interdependent, and at times, reciprocal. The women relied on these traditions which stemmed from their religious roots to support their remaining within their cultures.

Religion: A Stepping Stone to Spirituality

Unless the field is properly prepared, you can't put a seed in it. It will not germinate; it will not grow. Similarly, in the first part of any spiritual journey, the body and mind need that kind of preparation and that is what religion tells us to do, how to live an ethical life, a moral life, how to restrain our senses, how to put some order and discipline. These rules, regulations, disciplines, instructions, becoming moral, is preparation for spiritual life.... So it is step by step. My spirituality...it is grounded in religion and religion has been a stepping stone. Spirituality evolved gradually. Without that stepping stone, I would not have been able to come so far.

Sita's words capture the beliefs shared by several of the participants. Those who contrasted the terms, religion and spirituality, saw religion as providing the base from which their spirituality flourished. Ridha compared the development of spirituality through religion to the progression in formal education. *"Some of the religious stuff, you get in your nursery. Then you get in your first grade...spirituality is your tenth grade stuff...."* This view of spirituality as being an extension of her formal religious beliefs was also shared by Taja, one of the Hindu Indian participants.

Religion is a concept that is bound by rules and regulations and what you do - what you should not do and your beliefs....But spirituality to me is you take that religion and what it tells you and put it into practice in your daily life

"Be good, do good, see good," the words of Taja's guru, guide her spiritual life.

While spirituality grew out of and was shaped by their religious and cultural traditions which were communal in nature, the participants described their spirituality as intensely personal in nature. Sita credited her father with introducing her to the religious

scriptures and epic literature that gave her the “*guidance and wisdom to be inner-directed.*” She explained that the Hindu teachings encourage exploring the *inner being* to connect with a divine presence. Another word for God in Sanskrit is *Antaryami* which means the “spirit that moves within.” The sacred texts provided the structure for her to explore on her own.

The Ongoing Nature of Spirituality

The participants who differentiated between *religion* and *spirituality* shared a similar view of what spirituality entailed. In contrast to the strong sense of community that resonates through their stories when describing their religious traditions and formal practices, they viewed their spirituality as an personal internally-oriented experience. This tendency to contrast the terms spirituality and religion or at least understand them differently is also found in Western feminist spirituality literature (Christ, 1986) and educational psychology literature (Hague, 1995). While *religion* refers to and includes socially-based formal religious schools of thought and traditions, *spirituality* has more to do with a personal relationship with the sacred.

It was through their spirituality that they gained and sustained their sense of self - worth and strength. While religion and culture were still central in their lives, it was their spirituality, they believed, that truly guided and influenced who they were. Ridha eloquently shared her views.

Religion is there, you practice that, you go to church....I think like religion gives you some laws and some rules to go on your life ...And there are some historical facts...people have this belief and this happened and you have to believe that also. I take religion to the extent that it's there to lead a good life.... .It has some values; it has a lot of good teaching and it also gives words to purify yourself.... But why it takes roots in me? That's my spirituality. .I have belief in religion to some extent, but it is not that powerful...Spirituality took base from there... My

spirituality is more powerful. When you go inside yourself and you see, there is something more. It's not concerned with the world; it's more concerned with your own self.... For me, it (spirituality) means something you believe very deeply in yourself which is not something to do with the environment or with other people. It's something you are going through yourself.

The Shape of Spirituality: A Personal Relationship with God

To a woman, spirituality, or a life of the Spirit, implies relationship in its very essence...relationship to God in those intangible, fleeting moments when she is aware of a presence, whether it be in the sudden impact of a white cherry tree in blossom, or the rhythmical furrows of a plowed field; whether it be in a moment of unforgettable union with another human being or alone in the stillness of her own silence. Wherever it may happen there is for her always relationship.
(de Castillejo, 1974)

Sita, Ridha and Taja all spoke of a relationship with greater power which was recognized through connecting to the divine within. This divine within was God. This was also found by Anderson and Hopkins (1991) in their exploration of Western women's spirituality. Such a relationship was suggested by one Western woman who said that it is in the times of struggle "when you throw yourself into a situation where you have not got what it takes... [that you are able] to open up to God" (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p.50). As opposed to a sense of not having what it takes and a relenting of oneself, Ridha redefined and affirmed her connection with a greater power when she found strength within herself and asked "*What gives me this strength?*" Ridha explained that her spirituality and the presence of God within her had always been there; it was just a matter of recognizing it. The theme of awakening to or discovering the divine is a theme also found in Western literature. As Karpinski writes, "Grace has never been withheld from us. We have withheld it from ourselves by our limiting beliefs about ourselves" (1990, p. 80).

While for the Hindus and Moslem participants, connecting with the sacred, involved discovering a personal relationship with God, for Lotus, it involved spending time in personal meditation to increase her awareness of and connection with truth. While the view that God could be found within was shared by the participants who recognized the existence of a God, some felt that their final goal was to not only recognize God within but to also merge with God. Not surprisingly, this view was held by Sita and Taja, as the aim of merging with God is taught in Hindu philosophy. God for the women was considered omnipotent and as Taja said, the “only constant reality” as all else was impermanent.

Awakening Spirituality

Many of the participants discovered or became aware of their own personal spirituality, and in turn developed a relationship with something greater than themselves, in response to a time of crisis. The human inclination to seek meaning in times of difficulty guided the women to reflect on their religious roots and beliefs through which they nurtured their own personal spiritual growth. This allowed them to reconnect with what in their faiths remained meaningful and sustaining for them and to release what was no longer important. For many of the women, reflection was prompted by a crisis time, which occurred when they relocated to Canada. Separated from their extended families and unable to fulfill their familial and cultural obligations, they looked to their religious roots for guidance and comfort. Persian poet Rumi reminds us that seeking the divine is common in a time of crisis:

In times of sudden danger most people call out, “O my God!”
 Why would they keep doing this if it didn’t help?
 Only a fool keeps going back where nothing happens.

The whole world lives within a safeguarding, fish
inside waves, birds held in the sky, the elephant,
the wolf, the lion as he hunts, the dragon, the ant,
the waiting snake, even the ground, the air,
the water, every spark floating up from the fire,
all subsist, exist, are held in the divine. Nothing
is ever alone for a single moment.

All giving comes from There, No matter who
you think you put your open hand out
toward, it's That which gives.

(in Kornfield, 1993, p. 210-211)

In Western literature, a woman's spiritual quest also commonly begins in a period of struggle and unrest. This unrest, however, is often rooted in an *experience of nothingness* triggered by a sense of:

emptiness in their own lives –in self-hatred, in self-negation, and in being a victim; in relationships with men; and in the values that have shaped their lives. Experiencing nothingness, women reject conventional solutions and question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of deeper sources of power and value. (Christ, 1986, p. 13)

Their paths to a personal spirituality involved distancing from and often rejecting the formal religious traditions that they had known since childhood. "A woman's awakening to great powers grounds her in a new sense of self and an new orientation in the world. Through awakening to new powers, women overcome self-negation and self-hatred and refuse to be victims" (1986, p. 13).

The participants in this study did not share an experience of *nothingness* as described in the literature. They spoke neither of self-hatred nor of self-negation nor of rebelling against their inequitable status. As such, the emergence of their personal spirituality did not stem from or ultimately result in them rejecting their primary religions. As opposed to divorcing themselves from their religious roots, the participants through

their personal *awakening* experience (discovering *powers of being*),, gained insights and meaning that increased their acceptance of and enriched their own communally lived lives. The unrest experienced by the participants in this study stemmed from their sense of disconnection from their religious and cultural roots rather than a rejection of them.

In Ridha's struggle with cultural expectations, she did not give up her religious beliefs nor find that she could no longer "fit the old mold." Ridha discovered her spirituality as she found a way to redefine herself in order to stay within her culture. She did not critically and rationally analyze and then reject the limiting patriarchal forces that were inherent in her upbringing and current life story, but rather accepted them and found new ways to live within the traditional structure of her established traditions. Certainly, Ridha noted the potential oddity of this perspective from a Western viewpoint, as she said:

If you hear my story, you will say...she is a victim of chauvinism or male dominance....Anybody can say 'we think you have no rights.' At this point, if I want to think like that, ...I can come up to that conclusion...But...I really don't condemn. I am not frustrated.

Relocating within Cultural Traditions

Ridha's experience which involved reshaping her perspectives versus rejecting her religious traditions was similar to many of the other participants. While the onset of personal practices involved a re-examination of and reflection on their roots for many of the women, this did not take the form of a critical and rational examination and rejection of their cultural limitations and inequalities which may require divorcing and distancing themselves from their whole culture.

While developing a spiritual orientation, the women redefined and relocated themselves within their formal religious traditions and cultures. Their spiritual learning, though intensely personal in nature, was not divorced from but rather an extension of their formal religious practices and cultural heritage. For many of the participants, their spiritual learning served to reintegrate rather than distance them from their cultures. Their spirituality seemed to provide space for their personal voices and thus increased their sense of freedom within their own traditions. The women found strength to be more selective of their cultural practices and traditions. They chose to focus on and follow those practices and beliefs in their religions and cultures that sustained them. Lotus, for example, spoke of the belief in multiple births that is taught by many Buddhist sects, while admitting that, *"I don't much believe in that."* Ridha felt comfortable not "following all the rules;" she did not wear head coverings and other traditional clothing often worn by the women of some Muslim sects.

While much current Western literature, tends to contrast the terms *spirituality* and *religion*, historically this was not always the case. Almost a century ago, James named our own personal experience of the sacred as firsthand religion. Secondhand religion involved what we learn from others and included formal religious traditions. This resonates more clearly with the participants' view of their spirituality being embedded in rather than separate from their formal religious traditions (James, 1985).

The women's progression from a culturally-based faith to a more personal spirituality appears to resonate with Fowler's faith development theory (1981). Fowler's theory discusses *synthetic-conventional faith* where the assumption is of and authority rooted outside of oneself. This faith is commonly followed by *individuated-reflective*

faith where the authority is relocated within the self. While the participants appeared to progress through this sequence, the stages were by no means independent. Although the women in the study reported their personal spirituality to be highly influential, it was apparent that they were still guided to a great extent by religious and cultural norms.

Fowler's next stage *conjunctive faith* reflects a shift from an individual level to an interest in others and an acknowledgment that there are multiple truths. This is taught in both Buddhist and Hindu teachings. According to Sita, "*There are many paths to God.*"

The women told of learning community-based religious practices and then developing a personal spirituality which they trusted to guide and support them in their community lives. This apparent shifting from individual to community and back to individual in a spiral nature has been described by Kegan (1982). He suggests that adult development is not a linear process but rather takes a spiral shape.

The Gift of Suffering

Ah! If you only knew what peace there is in accepted sorrow.

Jeanne de la Motte-Guytan

As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable - something, as we say, sufferable.

(Geertz, 1973, p. 104)

The spiritual practices of the women, heightened during a time of crisis, appeared to increase their tolerance and acceptance of suffering. Some viewed suffering as a test or a gift from God. Ridha often seemed to marvel at her ability to remain hopeful through painful and crisis times. During the difficult time she experienced in Pakistan, and through times of struggle while living in Canada, she asked, "*what gives me this*

strength? Why am I able to withstand such life crises when others around me fall apart? Why can't I shake this religious stuff? Through times of struggle, her personal sense of the spiritual deepened. Ridha came to realize that the source of her strength was her religious beliefs and her connection with the God she had learned about as a child. She came to view her suffering as a test from an all powerful but benevolent God. The theme of suffering as a gift from God is also found in Christian traditions. In the words of Mother Theresa:

Suffering is a great gift of God;
those who accept it willingly,
those who love deeply,
those who offer themselves
know its value

(in Vardey, 1996, p. 340).

While not all the participants identified the suffering as a gift from God, they shared a common experience that their connection with what they considered divine was nurtured each time they turned to their spirituality during difficult times. Maya said her mantra, believed to be the word of God, in times of struggle. Taja talked of seeking a connection with Sai Baba inside herself. Each time she found solace and support in her spirituality during difficult times, her spiritual connection and belief in Sai Baba deepened. Lotus, during times of struggle, read and meditated upon the Buddhist teachings and the truth of impermanence to make sense of her daily life.

Coming Home to the Self and the Divine Within

A significant aspect of the quest for meaning is the search within ourselves for answers. To find them, we must trust that the divine speaks to us through our intuition. And to do this, we must recognize our own divinity, get to know our souls and learn how to nourish them.

(Vardey, 1996, p. 20)

Through establishing an internal relationship with what they considered divine, the women learned about themselves and gained a deeper understanding of their worth and strength. Sita's faith in God, she recounted, is what gives her strength. Tillich describes this notion of not only orienting to greater powers but also being supported by them as grounding. "...The self is not only oriented to great powers, but is also supported by them just as the ground provides a place on which to stand" (in Christ, 1986, p. 10). The idea of God in constant company resonates in Livesay's words, "I muse this blessed morning. Sad in solitude yet somehow not alone" (in Vardey, 1996).

Through "grounding" and the inherent internal support, an increased trust in the self is nurtured. This spiritual identity according to Sita is what gives her a sense of and confidence in her personal worth. She talked of her spirituality and the sense of connecting with the Hindu stories as what gives her the ability to stand on her own and respect herself. She recognizes her worth internally and so is less at the mercy of outside influences.

The acceptance and peace that flowed from their spiritual practices was a common theme of the participants. Their spiritual lives led to a tremendous sense of acceptance in many parts of their lives. They spoke of learning to accept themselves, their life conditions and constraints. As Sita shared:

I am neither a monk, nor an aesthetic nor a religious person. I am a housewife - happy to be house wife and within that constraint, I practice my spirituality.... I live a very restricted life as a housewife. My contact with the outside world is very limited and what I can do or can't do has been imposed on me by my life within that restriction. And also the climate, six months winter and snow. I have to have a inner life to survive as a sane person.

Their spiritual practices also led to a strong sense of acceptance of themselves. This acceptance appeared to nurture a peacefulness within themselves which also extended into the world. A learning to ground and trust in oneself is also discussed in Western women's spirituality literature. "Women often describe their awakening as a coming to self, rather than a giving up of self, as a grounding of selfhood in the powers of being, rather than a surrender of self to the powers of being" (Christ, 1986, p. 19). In contrast, many of the participants in the study described the grounding of their selfhood occurring, in part, through surrendering themselves to a greater power which some recognized as residing within. This was apparent in Taja's, Sita's and Ridha's narratives. Perhaps this acceptance and peace stemmed in part from the holistic views that they articulated. According to many of the women, all is explainable within the realms of the spiritual and the rational. In Sita's words:

In India, religious beliefs are more strong, whereas in the West, many people embrace scientific and rational thinking. They usually see various categories in conflict with each other, reason and intuition, facts and feelings...rationality and mysticism. Whereas for us, rationality is the stepping stone to mysticism. ...When you come to the boundary and reason can't take you anymore, then you fall back on intuition..

In Western feminist theory, a yearning for a holistic sense is also reported. Awakening is followed by a *new naming* of self and reality that articulates the new orientation to self and world achieved through experiencing the powers of being. As Christ explains, "I believe women's quest seeks a wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death, which have plagued Western consciousness" (1986, p. 8).

The acceptance stemming from their spiritual practices extended to other religions as well. Both Taja and Sita assured me that “there are many paths to reach God.” Hinduism and Buddhism actively teach that theirs is not the only path to God. While in Muslim thought there is only one way to reach God, Ridha, the Muslim participant, showed a keen interest in and curiosity about the faiths of the other participants. She would regularly ask me questions about Hinduism which seemed as foreign to her as it was me.

Connecting with the Sacred

We enter our sacred garden through a variety of gates. They open us to that innermost place that is at once natural, familiar, and exquisitely intimate.

(Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p. 72)

While a time of crisis prompted their spiritual growth, the participants chose different vehicles for connecting with the sacred. But for each participant, her choice was to do so alone. After relocating to Canada, Lotus experienced a time of great distress. During this time, she realized that Buddhist rituals were no longer as sustaining or meaningful for her. She began personal spiritual practices characterized by meditation and studying the words of Buddhist teachers. Lotus continues to spend time alone each morning meditating. Certainly meditation, or nonverbal prayer, or as it has been called in Christian traditions is commonly identified as a way to connect with something greater than ourselves.

Meditation is withdrawing from the world with its outer and inner barrage of distractions and an opening of the way for prayer that produces profound relationships of depth with myself, with God, and with all other souls. Solitude produces an emptying - a slipping from the grips of the world's fierce clutch - and a filling, a restoring, of interior space that is wholeness and holiness.

(Westerhoff and Eusden, 1982, p. 94)

In her time of struggle, Taja lay alone in her home and spoke to Sai Baba. “*Fine, you say you know me and my problems,...show me,*” she challenged. “*If you know my problems, then you also know, I don’t know what to do anymore. I have all these weights on my shoulders. I’m going to give them all to you.*” Maya performs her pujaa each morning and evening alone and completes religious readings. Maya told me that when she is struggling in her life, she repeats her *mantra* as it gives her comfort.

Both verbal and nonverbal methods of opening to the sacred are also described in Western literature. Borg (1997) talks of nonverbal ways of connecting with the sacred requiring the attentiveness of a bird-watcher. “As one watches silently and motionlessly, the forest can become alive” (p. 126).

The Reverence of Text and Story

While Lotus chose to meditate, Maya completed rituals and Taja spoke directly to her God, Sita and Ridha connected to the sacred through ancient religious texts. As the Koran is believed to be the word of God and the holiest source on earth for Muslims, it is not surprising that Ridha immersed herself reading the Koran seeking guidance and support during her crisis time in Pakistan. Many of the women shared a fondness for and reverence of story. When Sita experienced difficulty settling in Canada, it was to the sacred Hindu stories and texts that she turned to for comfort and guidance. According to Crites (1971),

Life also imitates art. The stories people hear and tell, the dramas they see performed, not to speak of the sacred stories that are absorbed without being directly heard or seen, shaped in the most profound way the inner story of experience. We imbibe a sense of meaning of our own baffling dramas from these stories, and this sense of its meaning in turn affects the form of [one’s] experience and the style of [one’s] action. (p. 304).

Stories with a sacred dimension point to a source of meaning that gives purpose to people's lives (Christ, 1986, p.3). In Christianity and other more Western-oriented religions, religious stories are also recognized as the means of connecting with the sacred.

Scripture as a sacred story is not something to be believed in but a means for mediating the sacred. That is, Scripture is not to be treated as an object of belief but is to be lived within. It is a lens through which we "see" God, life, and ourselves and a means by which our imaginations are shaped by the sacred. (Borg, 1997, p. 117)

There is concern, however, that stories as myth are losing their importance in a Western context.

Whatever the case may be, it is certain that the whole rationalistic bent of the new age, having given up on the authority of myths, has succumbed to a large and dangerous illusion: it believes that no higher and darker powers - which these myths in some ways touched, bore witness to, and whose relative "control" they guaranteed - ever existed, either in the human consciousness or in the mysterious universe. Today, the opinion prevails that everything can be "rationally explained." As they say, by alert reason. Nothing is obscure - and if it is, then we need only cast a ray of scientific light on it and it will cease to be so (Vaclav Havel in Vardey, 1996).

Concern is voiced in women's spirituality literature, though, that "women live in a world where women's stories rarely have been told from their own perspectives. The stories celebrated in culture are told by men" (Christ, 1986, p. 4). Women appear in the stories but only in roles defined by men. Therefore, there has been a call for women to create their own stories.

As women become more aware of how much of their own experience they must suppress in order to fit themselves into the stories of men, their yearning for a literature of their own, in which women's stories are told from women's perspectives, grows. (Christ, 1986, p. 6)

The participants in this research did not talk of suppressing themselves to fit themselves into the stories. They did not need new stories as they felt strengthened and supported when they connected with the spiritual source in the original story. Most of the women saw the stories as not written or defined by men but as direct revelations of God, and found comfort in immersing themselves in divinely inspired text.

Spirituality and Journey: The “I” in the Seeking

*‘Tis not in seeking,
 ‘Tis not in endless striving
 Thy quest is found.
 Be still and listen.
 Be still, and drink the silence
 Of all around.
 Not for the crying,
 Not for thy loud beseeching
 Will peace draw near.
 Rest, with palms folded,
 Rest with thine eyelids fallen—
 Lo, peace is here.*

Edward Rowland Sill, American poet (1841)

Throughout the research, it was clear that spirituality or characteristics thereof according to Western literature were part of the women’s lives but were perhaps named differently. The women spoke of personal relationships with something greater than themselves be it truth or God and told of learning to trust their own personal strength grounded in a sense of inner divinity. They also spoke of relying on their spiritual being to cope with and make meaning of the difficulties inherent in daily life. While only some of the woman separated these and named them as part of their *spirituality*, this seemed to stem largely from a lack of shared semantics rather than of common spiritual experiences.

The participants demonstrated similar difficulties with the term *journey*. Like *spirituality*, the woman spoke of characteristics inherent to *journey* according to a feminist theological perspective without actually naming them as such. The women spoke of the ongoing and sustaining nature of their spirituality. They also spoke of their spiritual path being primarily inner directed and personal. Unlike the physical journey taken by many men in formal religious traditions, their journeys often did not involve physically “going anywhere” but rather the women focused inward and traveled a path of connecting to and trusting the divine within themselves. This type of internal journey resonated with the stories of seeking shared by religious women in Western spirituality literature.

While similarities existed regarding the ongoing and internal nature of spiritual learning and development, and all the women consciously chose avenues which connected with what they defined as sacred, most shared that their ability and impetus to do so was not entirely within their control. There existed a sense of accepting and allowing spiritual growth as well as actively seeking growth in many of the participants’ narratives.

There was also discussion that spiritual paths may not be completed within one lifetime. Many of the participants come from religious traditions which recognize or at least allow for the possibility of multiple lives. In the Hindu tradition, one’s *karma* in this life (universal law of cause and effect) determines one’s status in the next. Buddhist traditions also teach of the potential of multiple births. As such, the participants’ understanding of the onset of spiritual growth was tied to spiritual awareness in previous

lives as well as personal inclination, training and desire. According to Khandewal who studied female spiritual seekers in India:

While one's spiritual journey may be long and twisted, full of falls, wrong turns and temporary digressions, it is never cyclical. Within the spiritual journey are shorter cycles of birth, death and rebirth, but the larger journey is a gradual movement towards liberation. (1995, p. 231).

Taja's belief in multiple births was apparent when said that her daughter had learned to meditate with ease because she was "*an old soul.*" In response to, "*Do you think spirituality is a conscious choice?*" Sita clearly articulated the distinction:

This personal choice is very much a Western concept....In a Hindu and Buddhist world, this personal choice is understood differently. Until the person is ready, the spiritual quest does not arise in his heart. Even if the knowledge is given, it is not retained. This readiness comes from one's own effort, spiritual practice, and the state of his previous birth....Personal choice or choosing a spiritual path will come some time in your life. Maybe in this life, maybe in your next life.

Some Final Thoughts

For these women who lived their lives in societies where religion and culture are inseparable and intertwined, many developed a personal spiritual sense which involved recognizing and nurturing a connection with something greater than themselves. While the women's understandings of the term *spirituality* differed, many viewed their spirituality (which was not always named as such) as an extension of their formal religious beliefs. Through their spirituality, they increased their understandings of and confidence in their own selves. Rather than distancing from their cultures which with their communal orientations were sustaining, their spirituality allowed them to redefine and relocate themselves within their cultures of origin. In the next section, I explore how these themes inform the field of adult education.

Spirituality and Learning: Informing Adult Education Practices

The participants are highly educated and are learners both in their formal and nonformal education practices. What can we learn from their insights on their own spiritual development about learning and spirituality? According to Tough (1988), we can learn much from people who are “learning on their own” that can be applied in educational settings. How then do the participants’ experiences of their emerging spirituality help inform the practice of adult education?

Foregrounding Culture: Diversity in Adult Education

*Whatever you believe is true – for you.
We do not act outside our perception of reality.
(Karpinski, 1990, p. 73).*

In the reading of all the participants’ stories of their spirituality, the tremendous influence of their culture on their sense of identity was unmistakable. All of the women defined and sustained themselves, at least in part, in terms of their religious roots and native cultures. These religious traditions upon which their more personal spirituality was based, formed the belief frames and lenses through which the women viewed and interpreted the world. The participants’ stories support current writing in adult education which focuses on multi-cultural learning. As the cultural makeup of formal adult education classes continues to increase in diversity, the importance of recognizing and understanding diverse cultures and frames of belief is considered to be key to facilitating adult learning and nurturing a supportive learning community. According to Barer-Stein (1993), “unrelenting efforts to develop awareness of ethno-cultural differences will help to expose previously overlooked areas of misunderstanding, intolerance, and disrespect both of teacher and student” (p. 159).

Such connections to culture, however, are not exclusive to the stories of these South Asian participants. According to Hall (1976), “we are our culture - who we think we are is constrained by what our culture encourages us to think we are. Any possibilities beyond these constraints normally lie beyond our conscious awareness and perception” (in MacKeracher, 1996, p. 260.) While the concept of individuality is considered integral to Western understanding, Barer-Stein (1993) reminds us that a great deal of what we claim as personal identity is actually “composed of the myriad of involuntary attachments to customs, values, manners, beliefs and attitudes rooted in cultural soil and learned before we were aware that were learning anything” (p. 151). We must also be cognizant that while students in formal adult education classes may superficially appear to share similar ethno-cultural backgrounds, with regards to language, appearance and lifestyle, considerable diversity within that culture and thus in the formal learning community continues to exist due in part to a lack of shared histories and the unique experiences of the individuals. The complexity of culture increases when we recognize that it is possible for one person to be part of several ‘cultural’ groups at the same time (Barer-Stein, 1993). Certainly, the participants in this study were not only members of South Asian and the Canadian cultures but also connected to cultural groups of their individual professions as well as other defining characteristics and qualities that make them individuals. As such, the participants in this study call us to not only increase our sensitivity to cultural frames of meaning but also to allow for individual differentiation within cultures.

Holistic Learning: Increasing our Ways of Knowing

*Enough Science and of Art;
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.
Wordsworth (in Aldous Huxley, 1975)*

The women in this study described a learning process that was holistic in nature as they shared understandings of and appreciation for both rationally based knowledge and intuitive learning. While the participants' spiritual learning involved consciously directing their attention to what they considered sacred, the process of learning involved an opening and releasing which was more intuitive in nature. Their appreciation for intuitive ways of knowing had been reinforced through their exploration of their religious and spiritual beliefs. Flowing from their Eastern cultural beliefs, they saw intuitive learning (if not named as such) as a valuable way of interpreting the world. Rather than considering intuitive learning as somehow less valid than cognitive learning--an assumption that appears to influence adult development theory and adult teaching and learning practices (MacKeracher, 1996)-- many of the women considered intuitive, and what some termed "mystical," ways of knowing as coming into focus and finding place when rational thought and words could no longer serve. It was clear with all the participants that they relied on both their rational selves as well as a intuitive knowing to receive, understand and make sense of the world.

The participants' stories of their learning support the growing interest and literature about holistic education (Miller, 1988; Miller, Cassie and Drake, 1990). "Would you play a one-string guitar?" asks Griffin (1993). Griffin along with many adult educators today are questioning the largely cognitively focused adult learning and

teaching practices which currently enjoy popularity. This movement recognizes that intuitive, spiritual, relational and emotional as well as rational capabilities of the human mind need to be acknowledged and facilitated in both teaching and learning practices. This is not a new movement but rather one that has enjoyed support in the past. According to Bertrand (1995), “the spiritualistic educational movement is probably one of the oldest on the planet. Like the tide, it always returns” (p. 9).

Self-directed learning has been a trend in adult education since the mid 1970s. To Caffarella and O'Donnell (1988), self-direction as a characteristic of adult learners and as an approach to learning, is probably the most discussed and debated issue in adult education. Candy (1991) reviewed literature on the skills and competencies required for self-directed learning. Among them were being methodical, disciplined, logical and analytical. MacKeracher (1996) in addressing women's learning perspectives asks, “What does being methodical and self-disciplined have to do with being self-directed as a learner?” She also queries whether “a self-directed learner could be analogical and holistic rather than logical and analytical” (p. 53). Many authors who write about women and learning feel that women's learning needs are not being met. Little change is apparent in formal adult education practices; self-direction appears to continue to validate a rational and cognitive style while only paying lip service to intuitive and relational learning.

The Relational Self and Learning

Relationality and connectedness was present in all the participants' stories of their religious learning and spirituality. Their cultural identification was supported and nurtured through religious events which were communal in nature. While their spiritual

practices involved primarily individual activities, it developed relationally through seeking and nurturing a connection with something greater than themselves that many described as a connection to God. This was supported through religious and cultural practices based in community. The women's experiences of the relational self support the increasing recognition this area is receiving in women's development and adult learning literature. In addition to the male models of development which tend to value a separate, autonomous and independent view of self, women's views of self development describe a relational self that is connected to others yet interdependent in relationships (Belenky et al.1986; Gilligan, 1982; MacKeracher, 1996).

This connected view of self is gaining increasing recognition in Western adult education literature. Given our penchant for privileging the individual, we are often not aware of our relational selves. There is increasing awareness that though much of our time is spent in relationships with others, we tend to take them for granted and fail to realize that our teachers, classmates and learning partners deserve a great deal of credit for whatever learning we achieve (Laverly, 1983). The interest in relational learning stems, in part, from attempts to better address women's learning needs which reportedly are not met adequately within an autonomous teaching and learning model. Current literature, thus, supports not only a holistic perspective of ways of learning but also of learning contexts. We learn not only by ourselves but also in context with and through others. "Do we need others in order to learn?" asks Griffin (1993). "My contention is that we do, although the interactions with others cannot be constant. We need a 'being with' and a 'being alone' in a rhythmic pulsation to learn best" (p. 111).

Revisiting Learning through Action

Learning through action has also gained recognition in adult education. Certainly, Freire's (1993) notion of *conscientization*, which results from reflection on action, and Shor's (1992) elaborations of action research theory have widely influenced current thinking in this area. The action research model, however, has translated into methods which tend to be functionalistic in nature and purpose and thus rather limited in scope. They tend to focus more on critical thinking and problem solving and targeting specifics without recognizing a holistic perspective that deserves acknowledgment.

The participants in this study clearly demonstrated that their sense of religion was learned through "hands on experience" and that this for most of them was sustaining in itself. The women did not appear to need to reflect on the experiences, neither personally nor critically, for them to be meaningful. Their meaning was inherent in the embodiment of the act "in the doing." Eastern religions emphasize and teach that many insights are gained through "being present in the moment" of experience rather than in the critical critique which tends to distance us from the event. The women's spiritual awareness also did not require critical reflection in the sense that they questioned the cultural assumptions upon which their beliefs were based. Early in the study, I had hoped involvement and open sharing in this study would encourage reflection on their practices and deepen their understanding of their own spirituality. While some of the women had not previously articulated their spirituality, nor had thought about why they thought and practiced the way they did, it was apparent that the reflection on practice, at least in the way I envisaged it through our conversations, appeared more of a necessity to me than it did to them.

From their stories, we can see the need not only to recognize and acknowledge the value of learning through action which may not be critically reflective in nature, but also the importance of being curious about the practices we complete by rote in order to open ourselves to other possibilities for increasing awareness and for understanding experience.

In summary, the women's stories call for a greater sensitivity to the ways of knowing of others. They draw our attention to the importance of balance and inclusive thinking and support the shift from a dialectical framework common in Western education contexts to more holistic approaches in adult learning.

Personal Reflections

This research was an ambitious undertaking for a masters' level thesis. After I had identified my participants, I was cautioned that it may be too overwhelming to include participants from four different countries and cultures and three different religions who spoke several languages with English typically not being their first. Despite my acceptance of individual uniqueness, in the back of my mind, I realize that I had wanted participants to "represent" some of the various countries, cultures and religions of South Asia. When I realized this, it was too late. After I had met and formed a unique connection with each woman, I could not imagine excluding any of their stories from the research.

The participants in this study did much to dispel my illusion of "South Asian" as a definable and exacting entity. Though I had purposely sought participants from diverse countries and religions, the women were more different than I had anticipated. Not only was I struck by their diversity but also by my own images of "Asian women" that our

conversations and this research brought to light. While they shared superficial characteristics such as dress and maintained some similar customs of their original cultures, the way they understood and sustained their traditions while in Canada differed for each of them. I also realized my bias for “just ritual.” I remember being discouraged after completing early interviews when it was apparent that many of the participants did not feel it necessary to analyze and rationally reflect on their formal religious rituals. Their completion of them felt “surface” to me. I was drawn to Borg’s words that “Observance can be by ‘rote’ or ‘habit’ – what one does if one takes a particular tradition seriously. But even when experienced because ‘this is what we do’ these practices can have a profound spiritual effect on the heart” (1997, p. 116). Upon reflection, I realized that when I asked them what an experience meant or why they completed a religious activity, I was actually asking, what is the point? I was also expecting them to answer a question about meaning from the way I understand it and from my perspective. I was frustrated because they were not making meaning the way I choose to do so (and not so secretly believe “ought” to be done).

I have since realized that my own view of making meaning is actually a search for purpose. I learned that I was not alone in looking for purpose as others with whom I confided my frustrations also shared this view. While certainly a common, credible, and perhaps more Western way of understanding the world, I wonder whether such intentional and active discovery which is perhaps more rational in nature limits our understandings. Watts’ words caused me pause for reflection when I read them for the first time nearing the end of this writing:

Paradoxical as it may seem, the purposeful life has no content, no point. It hurries on and on, and misses everything. Not hurrying, the purposeless life misses nothing, for it is only when there is no goal and no rush that the human senses are fully open to receive the world. (in Vardey, 1996, p. 398)

The participants also made me aware of the significant challenges inherent in trying to interpret other's stories when both culture and history are not shared. My conversations with the women, helped me redefine or "restory," to use Clandinin's term (1994), some of the cultural and religious traditions that I had witnessed and struggled with, and criticized while living in Asia. Due, in part, to the caste system and other cultural restrictions, women's lives and religious lives, in general, seemed to be "lives under the law" as described by Borg (1997), spiritual lives of requirements rather than ones of faith and grace. I am reminded to be cautious in my interpretations by Borg who states that an "easy dismissal ignores the fact that this way of being religious has not only nourished the lives of ordinary people through the centuries but also produced many saints and mystics" (1997, p. 120).

Completing this study has been opening and challenging for me. I witnessed times of great resistance on my part. I also remember times in the interviews feeling uplifted and honored for being included in the sharing of a private or particularly meaningful moment. Perhaps most of all, this study has allowed me to enjoy and relish a re-connection with my memories of Asia. I am reminded of experiences that remain sustaining for me and encouraged by possibilities opened for redefining and relocating my own self here in Canada.

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Appendix A

Learning Spirituality: Narratives of Five South Asian Women

A Research Study in Partial Fulfilment of a Masters in Adult and Higher Education
Department of Education Policy Studies, University of Alberta

Participation Agreement

I understand that this research study is part of a masters thesis. I agree to be a participant under the following conditions:

- participation is voluntary
- participants will receive no remuneration
- participants will remain anonymous
- participants are free to opt out at any time

Participant's Name: (Please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Graduate Researcher's Name: Jody Marshall

Graduate Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

What country in South Asia are you from? (If not known by interviewer). What is the name of your home town/city?

How long have you lived in Canada?

My purpose as an interviewer is to gain a deeper understanding of spiritual journeys or stories of women from South Asia.

What does the word “spirituality” mean to you?

What does the word “journey” mean to you?

What is a “spiritual journey” to you?

Can you tell me about religious/spiritual practices you were familiar with when you were growing up? How did those practices/teachings impact your life?

What was the impact of your culture on your spiritual/religious practices? Did you feel supported by your family? friends? culture? to practice your spirituality?

Why are your spiritual practices important to you? Can you tell me how your life would be different without your spirituality?

Tell me about your religious practices in Canada. How are they different than those you practice in name of home country?

Can you share an experience in your religious/spiritual life that you felt was very significant. Why was it significant? How was your life different after it occurred?

Have you ever experienced a “dark time” - perhaps a time when life seemed confusing and overwhelming - and how did this relate to your spirituality?

Have you ever gone on a trip or journey in connection with your spirituality?
If you could go on a journey, where would you choose to go and why?

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